



# 60 CURRENT DIALOGUE

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## Editorial

Dear readers,

I am glad to connect with you all again through *Current Dialogue*. The year 2018 proved to be a fruitful and eventful one for the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, as it was for the WCC itself, which celebrated its 70th anniversary. This momentous year was marked by important events as well as by new areas of focus and thrust so that interreligious engagement becomes relevant and responsive to the signs of the times.

A particular thrust of this year has been on education and formation. On 7 to 20 July, 17 young people met in the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre for the residential part of the six-week YATRA (Youth in Asia Training for Religious Amity) programme. Focusing on the theme "Passionately Christian and Compassionately Interreligious," the programme equipped the participants to confidently bear account of "the hope that is within us" in our own multi-religious contexts. Also significant this year was the completion of the work on *Education for Peace in a Multireligious World*, a joint document produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and the WCC's Office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation (IRDC). This joint document is just one example of the thriving relationship between the two offices. Recently, the partnership between them has given special impetus to dialogues with East Asian religions: the IRDC has initiated dialogue with Confucians, while the PCID has focused on building relations with Taoists. There has been a long-standing gap in this area of interfaith engagement; we hope these first steps will be building blocks for a strong relationship. I was privileged to take part in the Second Christian–Taoist Colloquium on Christian and Taoist Ethics in Dialogue, organized by the PCID in Singapore from 5 to 7 November. This colloquium reaffirmed that the challenge for all people of faith and goodwill in a world marked not just by growing hurt but also by glimmering hope is to cultivate those virtues which foster the flourishing of all life.

Another important area of work this year has been an interreligious consultation on Interreligious Dialogue and Liberation, organized in partnership with the Council for World Mission, Singapore, in late August in Siam Reap, Cambodia. The consultation explored the theological, spiritual, and practical contributions that religions could make to the theme and task of liberation in today's world. With a unique capacity to bridge theory and praxis, this project will be a major area of engagement for the IRDC in the coming years, as part of the WCC's overall focus on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

The WCC's International Reference Group on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation had a fruitful meeting in Chennai, India, in October at the headquarters of the Church of South India (CSI). It was a time of critical discernment and decision making as members of the group explored the future course of the IRDC's work, especially as we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the office in 2021.

It is noteworthy that the WCC central committee, which met in Addis Ababa in 1971 and approved the setting up of the erstwhile Subunit on Dialogue with Men of Living Faiths and Ideologies, described interreligious dialogue as an adventure. The sense of adventure has continued within the office; to share in the adventure, we welcomed in August this year the Rev. Dr David Marshall, our new programme executive responsible for relations with Islam and Judaism. In October we also welcomed Ms Jamie Morgan, our global mission fellow, seconded by the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. Now we have a full team comprised of a programme coordinator (also the programme executive responsible for

Dharmic faiths), a programme executive responsible for Islam and Judaism, a project assistant, and an intern. As a team, we hope to make a significant contribution to the WCC's interreligious work in the coming years, both in the service of our common humanity as well as toward the building of a better tomorrow. With this hope, we stand at the threshold of 2019 seeking to embrace with confidence and humility the opportunities that the year provides.

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# Jain Approaches to Religious Plurality

Melanie Barbato

At a time when strong religious identity is very often associated with violence and extremism, it is worthwhile discussing examples of alternative models of strong identity that are compatible with religious plurality. Jainism is an interesting case in this respect for several reasons: it is one of the oldest religions that is still practised, it is frequently referred to as the world's most peaceful religion,<sup>1</sup> and it is and has been a minority religion throughout all of its history in almost all locations where it exists.

After a few short introductory words about Jainism, this paper will discuss typical Jain attitudes to religious plurality. It will be shown that an appreciation of multiple perspectives can already be found in early Jain sources and formed, as the concept of *anekantavada*, a central pillar of Jain philosophy. This teaching on plurality, which to most Jain lay people is known through the story of the elephant and the blind men (described below), has been interpreted as the essence of Jain tolerance, a form of "horizontal inclusivism,"<sup>2</sup> and a resource for "flexible fundamentalism."<sup>3</sup> The paper will discuss these interpretations in the context of religious plurality and provide examples of concrete involvement of Jains in interreligious dialogue.

In contrast to Hinduism and Buddhism, the big religions of Indian origin, Jainism is still relatively unknown on a global level. There are around four million Jains, the majority of whom live in India, but with notable expatriate communities, particularly in the United States and Canada.<sup>4</sup> While even in India Jains make up less than 1 percent of the population, they are more significant than their numbers suggest. Compared to other communities, Jains have a very high literacy rate and a reputation as successful business people, including in the fields of publishing and the international diamond trade. While some Hindu nationalists would

like to see Jainism defined as a form of Hinduism, there are good arguments against this claim. For example, the Jain tradition does not consider the Vedas, the foundational Hindu texts, and the Sanskrit language sacred.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Jains seek to follow the example of 24 "fordmakers" who are held to have taught the path out of bondage and the cycle of rebirth.<sup>6</sup> These fordmakers are venerated as role models, but no salvation work is expected of them. It is believed that the soul is weighted down by the pollution of karmic particles, and that it can be cleansed through ascetic practices and proper understanding of reality. The final goal, which is considered achievable for everyone (though not in this lifetime), is that of a liberated and totally pure soul, which would also be omniscient.

Embarking and persisting on that path is every person's individual responsibility. Conversion to Jainism is possible, but Jainism is not a missionary religion and no efforts are made to win converts. The decline and even the temporary disappearance of Jainism are part of the natural cosmic rhythms that ideally do not perturb the believer. While Jainism is sought to hold all required tools and knowledge needed for achieving liberation, as a fact of lived experience religious plurality is not considered a problem. However, Jains, like other religious communities in India, object to aggressive missionary strategies or the idea that the benefits of learning from a religious tradition could be tied to requirements of formal conversion. At the basis of Jain identity lies the conviction that being a good Jain should include learning what is valuable from other religions, without turning one's back on one's own tradition or community. Jain leaders also acknowledge that the greatest challenge Jainism faces is winning back the young generation, which is won over not by

another religion but by a consumerist lifestyle, and which, in the case of the young expatriate generation, often stands in no direct contact with the Jain tradition.

My own experience as a researcher and as a Christian in India was that Jains were very open to welcoming members of other faiths. One interviewee, a highly venerated *bhattacharya* (a celibate religious functionary halfway between monk and layman), even tried to explain fundamental concepts of Jain philosophy to me by adapting his example to include the person of Jesus. In general, Jainism holds that as part of the pursuit of greater spiritual progress, contact with adherents of other faiths can be seen as an asset rather than a hindrance. This attitude has to do with the teaching of *anekantavada*, a fundamental concept of Jain philosophy and religion.

### ***Anekantavada* – The Jain Teaching of Plurality**

*Anekantavada* is a Sanskrit term that literally means non-onesidedness. This Jain teaching of non-onesidedness or plurality is thought to apply to both reality and knowledge. The ancient texts about the teachings of Mahavira, the last fordmaker, a contemporary of the Buddha, exhibit this value of appreciation of multiple perspectives. While the term *anekantavada* is not present in these conversations between Mahavira and his students, his teachings point beyond simple answers to the complexity of existence. For example, the Bhagavatisutra states:

*The world is ... eternal. It did not cease to exist at any time, it does not cease to exist at any time and it will not cease to exist at any time. It was, it is and it will be. It is constant, permanent, eternal, imperishable, indestructible, always existent. The world is ... not eternal. For [in the cosmic cycle] it becomes progressive after being regressive. And it becomes regressive after being progressive. The soul is ... eternal. For it did not cease to exist at any time. The soul is ... not eternal. For it becomes an animal after being a hellish creature, becomes a man*

*after becoming an animal, and it becomes a god after being a man.*<sup>7</sup>

On a philosophical level, Jainism came to hold that any object is characterized by infinitely many properties. For a mango, this includes most obviously the properties that are perceived through the senses, like being yellow, soft, and located in the fruit bowl, but it could also be said to include an infinite number of negative properties, like not-being-blue, no-longer-being-hard, not-being-in-the-basket. Perfect knowledge would have to consider infinitely many perspectives of both positive and negative nature. Such knowledge is seen as possible in the case of liberated souls whose perception is no longer clouded by the dirt of karma. For most ordinary beings, however, it is justified to say that their knowledge grasps only a very limited segment of reality. A philosophical ideal expressed in Sanskrit texts would therefore be to add the word *syat/syad*, in that context translatable as “from a certain perspective,” to every utterance. The point would be to show that the speaker is well aware that an infinite number of different but equally valid statements could have been made instead.

Jainism is thus simultaneously characterized by a great respect for knowledge and the ideal of intellectual humility. From this follows a certain reluctance to condemn other positions as outright wrong. Rather, non-Jain positions tend to be described as limited; those that aggressively claim to hold the absolute truth are perceived as most limited. In the competition of different religions and worldviews, the Jain strategy is to point out that many of them have understood part of reality, but at the price of denying other, equally valid descriptions of reality. The superiority that Jainism tends to claim for itself is that of embracing all true descriptions of reality. Wilhelm Halbfass has described this as a horizontal model of inclusivism, in contrast to what he understood as other, more vertical forms of inclusivism in India:

*The Jainas present their own system not as the transcending culmination of lower stages of truth, but as the complete and comprehensive context, the full panorama which comprises other doctrines as partial truths or limited perspectives. ... The subordination of other views to the Vedāntic idea of brahman or the Madhyamaka viewpoint of 'emptiness' (śūnyatā) postulates an ascent which is at the same time a discarding and transcendence of doctrinal distinctions; ... [the] Jaina perspectivism, on the other hand, represents a horizontally coordinating inclusivism which recognizes other views as parts and aspects of its own totality. Of course, the Jainas, too, claim a superior vantage point, and a higher level of reflection.<sup>8</sup>*

This inclusivism, which does not deny the accuracy of other views in their adequate context, is most typically illustrated in many modern Jain texts by the story of the blind men and the elephant.

### **The Blind Men and the Elephant**

As with almost any religion, most lay followers do not have intimate knowledge of their tradition's philosophy and theology. However, almost all people I spoke to knew that *anekantavada* was one of the foundations of Jainism. Most frequently, they explained the concept through the story of the blind men and the elephant. This story is shared with other Indian traditions, and it is impossible to make authoritative statements about its origin. It is, however, particularly fitting for the Jain context. The story is that a group of blind men encounters an elephant for the first time. They each touch a part of the animal's body. The man who touches the leg states that an elephant is like a tree trunk; the man who touches the tail, that an elephant is like a broom; the man who touches the ear, that an elephant is like a large, soft fan; and so on. They start arguing, and their dispute is resolved only when a seeing person comes by and tells them their mistake: they are each correct in their description, but they have touched only a small part of the animal: an elephant has all of these characteristics in different parts at the same time.

The seeing man in the story is obviously the Jain who has taken to heart the lesson of *anekantavada*. The blind men are those who, in seeking to promote the view of their own tradition and experience, close off their minds to the positive contribution others could make.

Virachand Gandhi (not to be confused with Mahatma Gandhi), the representative of Jainism at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, used the story of the blind men and the elephant in his address. There he did not draw the line between Jains and non-Jains, but between narrow-minded and open-minded people:

*If you will only permit a heathen to deliver his message of peace and love, I shall only ask you to look at the multifarious ideas presented to you in a liberal spirit, and not with superstition and bigotry, as the seven blind men did in the elephant story. ... Brothers and sisters, I entreat you to hear the moral of this story and learn to examine the various religious systems from all standpoints.<sup>9</sup>*

The 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions was, as an add-on to the World's Columbian Exposition, an enterprise of progressive Christians who sought a similar mindset in other traditions. The event was by no means open to all forms of religion, as most strikingly the exclusion of indigenous leaders from the assembly shows. In this setting, Gandhi as a "heathen" humbly asks for permission to deliver his message. That message, nevertheless, is one of great self-confidence because he sets out to show that Jainism already encompasses all the principles that the event is dedicated to: namely, weighing, in a rational and compassionate way, the merits and shared reason of different traditions.

### **Non-violence and Tolerance in the Jain Tradition**

In Jainism, the adequate attitude to others is typically framed in terms of *anekantavada* and *ahimsa* (non-violence, non-killing). The term "tolerance" is also frequently found in

attempts to express *anekantavada* and *ahimsa* in Western terms. The openness toward other positions does not, however, mean that Jainism considers all religious positions and lifestyle choices as being equal. One issue on which there is very little room for discussion for all Jains that I spoke to was the issue of meat eating. Meat eating, and unnecessary killing of any form of life in general, are thought to lead to serious karmic influx and are considered unacceptable. This emphasis on *ahimsa* is not just theory. I met ordinary Jains who cared deeply even about the life of a mosquito in the room. One female interviewee, upon being asked what it means for her to be a Jain, simply told me this: to live a vegetarian life. In my interviews, I tried to see if Jains would agree that if there are many sides to all things, there might also be a perspective from which meat eating would be justified. This was not the case, as vegetarianism, at least in a moderate form, was considered a fundamental pillar of Jainism, so much so that there is sometimes a readiness to see non-Jain vegetarians who have friendly relations with Jains as Jains, too.

While the rejection of meat eating was categorical, the relation to other religions expressed by the people I spoke to was more complicated. On one occasion I discussed *anekantavada* and religious plurality with three educated lay people. They compared the Buddhist and Jain teachings to two sides of the same coin, implying that both are possible views of reality and are equally true. However, when I asked them if they thought a Buddhist could gain liberation, the reaction was a spontaneous “no.” This points toward a more general observation I made: that there are at least two approaches to religious plurality. The first is that other positions are just a different perspective of the same reality, and thus equally valid; the second is that the adherents of other views may be wrong, but still deserved to be treated non-violently, with aggressive discussion potentially already constituting a form of violence. It

appeared to me that the difference between these two positions had often not been reflected on. The Jains I spoke to considered non-violence, open-mindedness, and tolerance to be key elements of Jain identity; the line separating open-mindedness from relativism was negotiated intuitively rather than according to a set of doctrines.

As Paul Dundas has pointed out, history provides many examples that point to the limits of Jain tolerance. For example, the Uttaradhyayan sutra states: “The heterodox and the heretics have all chosen a wrong path; the right path is that taught by the Jinas. It is the most excellent path.”<sup>10</sup> Dundas has argued that the connection between *anekantavada* and tolerance is more complex than is commonly acknowledged, and that benevolent inclusivism often only thinly masks an internal exclusivism.<sup>11</sup> At least minimal boundaries are necessary for maintaining a community. Pointing out the “intolerant” aspects of Jainism (which is undeniably, in general, very tolerant compared to many other religions) is required by a scholar like Dundas only because Jainism is, sometimes by Jains themselves, presented simply as the religion of non-violence and tolerance. Within this context, it is worthwhile remembering that *anekantavada* was originally developed as part of a complex philosophical system. It was not only used to remind people of the need to consider the possible merit of other views, but also as a rhetorical device that reduced other prominent positions in the Indian philosophical landscape to limited perspectives. Such limited perspectives could be played off against each other or included under the horizontal inclusivism of the Jain tradition. Jainism’s principle of non-violence should therefore not be confused with meekness.

Also, while Jains, as well as many other members of Indian religions, are certainly very tolerant by Western standards, the term “tolerance” should be applied with care as a description of Jainism, as it developed within a totally different context than the



Jain concept of non-violence. Jainism originally was a renouncers' religion. At its core stood not the flourishing of a group of people on earth, but the salvation of individual souls within the vast cosmic cycles of rebirth. Jain vegetarianism was developed to exclude food that was sourced violently, most obviously meat but also eggs, root vegetables of which the whole plant is taken on harvest, as well as plants that are ascribed aphrodisiac properties. However, despite the possible ethical questions surrounding dairy products, they are permitted according to Jain dietary rules. While these dietary rules correspond in many aspects to contemporary advice for a healthy diet, the origin and outlook of these rules is very different from those of Western vegetarianism. The religious dietary rules are not primarily aimed at producing a healthy body but a healthy soul, which is achieved, among other factors, by avoiding the consequences of polluting action and consumption. This is by no means incompatible with animal rights and environmental protection activism, which Jainism is also known for today. But it means that the original and primary function of this aspect of religion was not ethics seeking to protect the other, but the self-interest of the renouncer on the quest for liberation.

Similarly, Jain tolerance and non-violence are rooted in the idea that a violent, angry person is harming first him- or herself. Religious sectarianism, pride, and hostility betray an undue attachment to the world. One *bhataraka* told me that religious “-isms” did not matter to him, and that he looked only for a pure soul. Describing different religions as social phenomena, this *bhataraka* did not even exclude his own tradition from the danger of becoming a hindrance to real progress. A scholar in a university department of Jainology told me that for him there was only one religion, and that was not Jainism but non-violence. In other words, if violence (defined primarily as the taking of life) is the key factor in the attraction of karmic dirt particles, then from

the Jain perspective a violent Jain may be no closer to liberation than a violent Christian or Muslim. It may also be for this reason that many Jains I spoke to were critical of having their path labelled as an “-ism” and a “religion.” For them, the importance lay in breaking through limited and limiting categorizations. This must, however, not be confused with simple individualism. The sacred texts and stories of the formakers were often close at hand to serve as guidelines to distinguish between right and wrong.

### Jainism and Interreligious Dialogue

Jainism has a long tradition of seeking to bring together different viewpoints. This has also borne fruit in the form of interreligious engagement. Most prominently, Acharya Sushilkumar – the first initiated Jain leader to travel abroad by plane against religious prescriptions – founded a religious centre called Siddhachalam in Blairstown, New Jersey, USA. Siddhachalam is headquarters to the World Fellowship of Religions, which was “founded in the 1950s to promote unity and understanding among world religions.”<sup>12</sup> Acharya Sushilkumar also served as a mediator between Sikh separatists and the Indian government during the Sikh–Hindu conflict surrounding the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and was supported by both moderate Hindus and Sikhs.<sup>13</sup> Being a member of the Jain community may have helped him to gain credibility as a mediator. Not only were Jains not an implicated party, Jains are also more generally known for their commitment to non-violence. There is no public memory of the Jain community as aggressors in Indian history.

Jains have pointed out the specific resources their religion can bring to interreligious dialogue. After the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions, a group of young Jain participants wrote an article about the insights they had gained from the event, which appeared in similar versions on the organization's website and in the Huffington Post. The article states:

*As advocates of non-violence (ahimsa) and believers of equality and respect for all viewpoints (anekantvad), while being mindful of the impact of our personal consumption in the world around us (aparigraha), it is our social responsibility to advance these issues and to be more engaged and connected in mainstream outlets. ... Jainism is both a scientific and practical philosophy that adapts to social and cultural shifts while preserving its core values and practices. Anekantvad teaches us that everyone has a voice and something valuable to contribute.*<sup>14</sup>

This passage shows that the young Jains view their involvement in interreligious activities in the context of the Jain teaching of *anekantavada*. To them, this means that everyone deserves a voice and everyone can contribute something of value. The group stresses that in their view, Jainism is both scientific and practical. Maybe most crucially, they refer to a central aspect of Jain identity: it “adapts to social and cultural shifts while preserving its core values and practices.”

Many Jains take pride in there being no contradiction between their religion and reason. They seek to contribute toward a better world beyond their community by drawing on the resources of the Jain tradition. The most notable document in this respect is the *Jain Declaration on Nature* that was submitted to Prince Philip, then-president of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).<sup>15</sup> These activities should be understood as encompassing a range of goals from theological dialogue to public diplomacy; a general point can be made that Jains in the West tend to present and explain their religion in the modern and positively connoted terms of ecology, vegetarianism, and tolerance. For example, a code of conduct based on traditional Jain values but speaking to the challenges of the modern world has been formulated by the *Anuvrat* movement. This movement was founded in 1949 by the Acharya Tulsi, “a leader who has always been committed to contemporary concerns and interfaith dialogue, especially with Buddhism.”<sup>16</sup> This code explicitly includes the rule “I will practice religious

tolerance. I will not rouse sectarian frenzy.”<sup>17</sup>

On the highest level of interreligious diplomacy, meetings have been held between Jain delegates and the Holy See. In 2013, a Catholic–Jain community meeting was held in London under the theme “Catholics and Jains: The Practice of Non-Violence as a Contribution to Peace.” The inaugural address by Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, quotes both Jesus and Mahavira, emphasizing that “both Christianity and Jainism ... give primacy to a life of love and non-violence.”<sup>18</sup>

While there is little research dealing with the topic of Jainism and interreligious dialogue, a paper by Christopher Key Chapple is of great relevance to this discussion. In this paper, the Jain approach to other religions and worldviews is presented as an ancient Indian model of interreligious dialogue that combines an unshakable commitment to fundamental teachings (such as karma and rebirth) with an openness to learn from those holding other views. Chapple calls this model “flexible fundamentalism,” without implying the negative connotations that often accompany the term “fundamentalism.” Comparing this model to the dialogue approaches of Christian ecumenists, he observes both differences and similarities. He concludes that while the Jain approach to other views is less “exploratory, creative, synthetic, and ... syncretic”<sup>19</sup> than that of many ecumenists, Jainism’s flexible fundamentalism “offers one option for validating a fundamentalist devotion to basic teachings while still acknowledging the validity of divergent views within their own context.”<sup>20</sup>

While my research led me to hold that Jain encounters with other views can also be synthetic/syncretic (in their dealings with religious positions but particularly with regard to the “scientific” worldview), I share with Chapple the observation that Jains generally combine a strong core identity with an openness to other views. Many Jains appear to perceive religious plurality not as

threatening but as a natural part of the world and, at least at times, as an opportunity to learn and grow. This combination of a strong identity and an openness to religious plurality and dialogue makes Jains interesting conversation partners on matters of identity, interreligious dialogue, and non-violence.

This does not mean that engaging with Jainism in an interreligious and intercultural perspective is not challenging. Jeffery D. Long has called Jainism “the West’s radical other” and points out that in the university classes he teaches, he found that of all the religions he discussed with his students, Jainism was the one they struggled to come to terms with the most.<sup>21</sup> For Christians, the challenge of Jainism lies particularly in its ascetic ideal, which is based on the dichotomy of soul and matter and its radical but atheist system of ethics. Maybe it is because of and not despite this fact that engagement with the theory and practice of Jainism can be so fruitful. At the end of his book, Long expresses his gratitude for learning about *anekantavada*, stating that he found it to be “an essential tool for affirming pluralism without lapsing into a self-refuting relativism, and for taking differences seriously without allowing these differences to undermine the greater project of finding truth in all traditions.”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Jainism is an ancient Indian religion with a firm commitment to non-violence and intellectual openness. Exploring the Jain approaches to religious plurality, this paper has argued that the dialogic identity, which characterizes many Jains, can be understood as contributing to this success story. *Anekantavada*, the Jain teaching of plurality, has allowed the adherents of Jainism to adapt to new settings and contexts without compromising on the core of their religious identity. At a time in which violent fundamentalism is often seen as the natural response to the pressures of globalization, the more dialogic identity that is typical for Jainism’s “flexible fundamentalism” can

point to the general possibility of strong but non-aggressive religious communities that are compatible with peaceful co-existence and religious plurality.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Sherry Fohr, *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay on Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 414.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Chapple, “Two Traditional Indian Models for Interreligious Dialogue: Monistic Accommodationism and Flexible Fundamentalism,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 7:2 (1993): 18–30.

<sup>4</sup> Both the terms “Jains” and “Jainas” are used for the adherents of Jainism. Similarly, the middle and final “a” of the term *anekantavada* are sometimes dropped.

<sup>5</sup> Here is not the place to go into detail about definitions of Hinduism or the general problem of the category “religion” in the Indian context. Those who are interested in a more detailed discussion of many issues touched on in this paper may refer to my book *Jain Approaches to Plurality: Identity as Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Good introductions to the teachings of Jainism can be found in Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); and Robert J. Zydenbos, *Jainism: Today & Its Future* (Munich: Manya Verlag, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism (Anekānta-vāda)*, L.D. Series 79 (L.D. Institute of Indology, 1981), 19.

<sup>8</sup> See Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 414.

<sup>9</sup> For the complete speech, see John Henry Barrows, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 171.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Dundas, “Beyond Anekāntavāda: A Jain Approach to Religious Tolerance,” in Tara Sethia, ed., *Abhimā, Anekānta and Jainism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 125.

<sup>11</sup> Dundas, “Beyond Anekāntavāda,” 125. It is worth

pointing out that in the Western context also, there are different conceptions of tolerance, ranging from enduring the presence of attitudes one dislikes to broad-mindedness to the appreciation of plurality.

<sup>12</sup> Kristi L. Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 2004), 207.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 363.

<sup>14</sup> Nikhil Bumb, Neal Daftary, Parth Savla, Priti Shah, and Sonali Vakharia, “Young Jains Share Insights from Parliament of the World’s Religions,” <https://www.parliamentofreligions.org/articles/young-jains-share-insights-parliament-worlds-religions>.

<sup>15</sup> L.M. Singhvi, *The Jain Declaration on Nature* (Office of Jaina High Commissioner for India, London, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Nalini Balbir, “Practice of Non-Violence and Peace: The Jain Perspective,” *Catholics and Jains: Practice of Non-Violence as Contributor to Peace* (2013), 4, <http://www.jainology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/JainNonViolence-NaliniBalbir-14June2013.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.anuvibha.in/Code-of-Conduct.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Cardinal Tauran, “Catholics and Jains: The Practice of Non-Violence as a Contribution to Peace” (2013), 2, <http://www.jainology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Cardinal-Tauran-Address.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Chapple, “Two Traditional Indian Models for Interreligious Dialogue,” 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Long, *Jainism*, 174.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

# On Destabilization and Multiple Religious Belonging in Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

Beatrice Porsiana

One of the conclusive and most representative documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, better known as *Nostra Aetate*, exhorts all members of the Catholic Church to contribute to interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Some pioneers had embarked on this dialogic experience even before the publication of this conciliar document in 1965; among them are the monastics,<sup>2</sup> on whose work I centre this paper. Their prolonged participation in interreligious dialogue offers us ample grounds for reflection, especially the dialogue of religious experience that they practise. Even though it is devoid of a forced concordism, it appears to be particularly fruitful, as the focus has shifted from doctrinal frictions to the sharing of the spiritual dimension. In the first section, I identify and analyze the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID)'s four-fold framework for interreligious dialogue, which allows me, in section two, to locate the position of monastic interreligious dialogue within this framework. Through these preliminary sections, the adoption of Eastern contemplative methods emerges as one of the main practices of monastic interreligious dialogue, which leads me, in section three, to the individuation and description of three possible levels of destabilization that the monastics can experience because of it, such as the removal of the self from its egocentric position, the loss of contextual points of reference and a habitual contemplative approach, and the annihilating tendency. Finally, after having acknowledged that these levels of destabilization result from intrareligious dialogue, I address the question of whether the adoption of Eastern forms of contemplation should be regarded as an instance of multiple religious belonging.

## I. Different Forms of Interreligious Dialogue

There are different types of interreligious dialogue. To identify the type of dialogue I refer to in this paper, I shall outline the categorization of interreligious dialogue in accordance with the documents published by the PCID. This categorization emerges in PCID documents even prior to the change of the Council's name in 1988 from the Secretariat for Non-Christians.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, in the 1984 document *Dialogue and Mission* (DM), the Secretariat acknowledges that as all Christians are called to interreligious dialogue, this can be pursued in different ways: in the doctrinal field, through a daily relationship in the "Dialogue of Life," and by contributing to the specialized *inter-monastic dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> To be precise, it individuates four kinds of dialogue: (a) "The dialogue of life ... for all," (b) "the dialogue of deeds ... for working together," (c) "the dialogue of specialists ... for understanding," and (d) "the dialogue of religious experience."<sup>5</sup>

Later, in 1991, the PCID published a follow-up document to DM, entitled *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP). In section 4, the PCID reflects on the topic of forms of interreligious dialogue. In consonance with the previous document, the same four forms of dialogue are listed, with slightly different names: (a) "The dialogue of life," (b) "The dialogue of action," (c) "The dialogue of theological exchange," and (d) "The dialogue of religious experience."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, and most recently, in 2014, the trilogy of PCID orienting<sup>7</sup> documents on interreligious dialogue finds its temporary completion in the document *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* (DTC). As a constant element throughout these three documents,

we find a concise discussion of the forms of interreligious dialogue. In DTC there is no change in the four appellations of the forms of dialogue compared to DP.

## II. The Position of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue within the PCID Structure

To situate monastic interreligious dialogue in this endeavour, I shall refer to the authority of a 1993 document edited by Fr. Pierre de Bethune,<sup>8</sup> *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue* (CID). It resulted from the experience and joint efforts of the European and American commissions for monastic interreligious dialogue: the Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique (DIM) and the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID).<sup>9</sup> There is no need to go too far into the document to realize which of the four above-mentioned forms of interreligious dialogue is characteristic of the monastics. In section 1, de Bethune quotes a 1989 address by Pope John Paul II to the monks of the Christian and Buddhist traditions, where he states that “dialogue at the monastic level is truly a religious experience”<sup>10</sup>; he thus places DIMMID’s endeavour mainly on the plane of the dialogue of religious experience. According to Fabrice Blée, one of the desiderata of the CID was to locate the monks’ interreligious dialogue within the PCID dialogic structure in order to acknowledge its legitimacy. Therefore, this legitimacy is recognized to be derived from the fourth kind of dialogue: the dialogue of religious experience. It is probably because of the priority of this desideratum that de Bethune decides to quote at the beginning of the document, in the preamble, the description of this kind of dialogue provided by DM.<sup>11</sup>

Here, de Bethune repeats seven times that the monastic interreligious dialogue happens at the level of prayer – not simply to clarify the usual procedure, according to which the monastics interpret the dialogue of religious experience, but also to identify the fulcrum of this interreligious encounter, that is, the sharing of contemplative prayer.

Undoubtedly, we should not underestimate the role of contemplation within the monastic life. However, what is crucial here, and possibly problematic, is that sharing contemplative prayer with dialogic partners who are members of different religions means allowing them to witness and take part in Catholic contemplative practices as well as equally adopting non-Christian contemplative traditions. In the next section I explore the internal conflicts that might arise because of this approach to interreligious dialogue.

## III. Three Levels of Destabilization

Even though adopting contemplative methods developed by Eastern religious traditions is widespread<sup>12</sup> and is aligned with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, it is not unproblematic for those who commit to it, as they will face, as I argue here, what I describe as three levels of destabilization.

### On the word “destabilization”

Allow me to make a preliminary remark on what I mean by the word “destabilization.” Having a closer look at the word allows us to recognize that it is composed of the prefix “de-”, which comes from the Latin prefix *de-* and denotes, in this case, “removal, reversal, reduction,”<sup>13</sup> and by the substantive “stabilization,” which comes from the Latin adjective *stabilis*,<sup>14</sup> meaning “stable,” which is derived from the Latin verb *stāre*, meaning “to stay.” Therefore, what I mean by destabilization is the removal (*de-*) from a stable (*stabilis*) position (*stāre*, to stay), or the reduction of stability. Now it is necessary to identify what is removed from its stable position or what experiences a reduction of its stability at the contemplative level. It is the self, as I explain in the next subsection.

### First level of destabilization

Contemplation has always entailed a certain degree of destabilization in terms of “losing oneself” [emphasis added],<sup>15</sup> letting go, abandoning oneself to Jesus Christ, in order to “be grasped”<sup>16</sup> by him. What is meant by

losing oneself at the level of prayer is seeking God through liberation from those instincts that lead to the *selfishness* of sin and error.<sup>17</sup> This desirable destabilization is obtained by ignoring selfish instincts, that is, ones which would cause men to sin and make errors, and, thus, being liberated from their control.<sup>18</sup> This liberation allows the divine grace to pervade the free-from-selfishness (or emptied – emptied from the control of the selfish instinct over men) self. Hence, Christian contemplation already implies a basic, inherent, and desirable level of destabilization: “basic,” for within this structure of contemplative destabilization, this form of destabilization constitutes its first level, its *conditio sine qua non* for the other levels of destabilization to take place.

### **Second level of destabilization**

Then there is a second level of destabilization that monastics face: the “loss of habitual references,”<sup>19</sup> as de Bethune concisely describes it. This is also for those experimenting with contemplative practices developed by different religious traditions. In fact, on top of having the self destabilized since being removed from its stable and habitual position to make room for the work of the Spirit, the self is also destabilized by the loss of (a) contextual points of reference, such as symbols, gestures, and surroundings, and (b) the habitual approach to contemplation. For example, a Christian believer, accustomed to addressing a personal “Thou” in prayer or abandoning himself to a “Thou” (the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit) and “Thy work” in contemplation, might find their first Buddhist contemplative experience quite destabilizing since, apart from possibly being immersed in a completely different environment from the habitual one (difference in context: symbols, languages, rites, places, surroundings), there is no one to address or to whom to abandon oneself (difference in contemplative approach). In this case, the Christian believer experimenting with Mahāyāna Buddhist contemplation will have to depart from their habitual points of reference to discover

“their own Buddha nature through the experience of non-duality” and a still mind.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, a second level of destabilization has just emerged in the specific context of contemplation by means of adopting different, in this case Eastern, contemplative practices. This second level of destabilization can be concisely described as “additional,” “adventitious,” and “limitedly desirable.” “Additional,” for it is a further level of destabilization compared to the basic, inherent, and desirable one. In other words, the destabilizing differences – in both the contemplative context and approach – can be experienced as differences only after one is exposed to the basic contemplative practice of liberating the self from egocentrism and selfishness to make room for the permeation of the divine. “Adventitious” (from the Latin *ad-venire*, meaning “coming from the outside”<sup>21</sup>), for this destabilization is not inherent, that is, strictly linked, to contemplation per se; on the contrary, it comes from the outside, that is to say from the different Eastern contemplative practices adopted to promote interreligious dialogue. Finally, this second level of destabilization can be described as “limitedly desirable,” for not every monastic should feel forced to engage in interreligious dialogue through the dialogue of religious experience; hence, not every monastic should feel compelled to adopt Eastern practices of contemplation.

### **Third and fourth forms of destabilization: Annihilation**

Now we should consider the last two forms of destabilization, which are not at all desirable, especially if compared to the two previously examined levels. The third and fourth destabilizations are strictly connected to each other, since they result from what I think is the same tendency: not to respect the specificity and originality of the otherness, and not to maintain the difference we encounter within the dialogic partner and the dialogic self. To be more precise, these third and fourth

destabilizations happen on the same level: the level of annihilation of difference. However, the annihilation can be directed toward either one of the two dialogic poles: the other or the self. This annihilation can have a negative impact on the interreligious dialogue – either directly, when the difference of the dialogic partner is annihilated by assimilation, or indirectly, when the difference and originality of one’s religious singularity is annihilated by becoming a proselyte of the religion of the dialogic partner, and thus renouncing to ensure the reciprocity of the interlocution.<sup>22</sup> Blée has described this destabilizing tension between the tendency to assimilate otherness and obliterating one’s identity in dialogue as a “power struggle.”<sup>23</sup> This is a definition with which I find myself very much in agreement and along whose lines, from now on, I would like to talk about dialogic potentials and their degeneration into settlement of power as a consequence of the so-called power struggle.

Even though interreligious dialogue has great potential, I am afraid it can become pernicious if it comes to this third level, where the potential it possesses degenerates into a struggle for power. As stated in the introductory paragraphs of *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* (DTC), the latest of the documents PCID has compiled on this subject, “Interreligious dialogue, in itself, does not aim at conversion.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, there is no need to transform its potential, that is, the mutual encounter, the reciprocal and respectful listening to each other, the possibility to work together for peace and other common intentions,<sup>25</sup> into a power struggle where one either tries to assimilate – in a totalitarian manner – the different elements of the other religion into one’s tradition (the third form of destabilization) or, conversely, becomes a proselyte of the religion of one’s dialogic partner, thus obliterating the singularity of one’s religious identity and renouncing to share one’s long-time religious experience (the fourth form of destabilization).

Since the third and fourth forms of destabilization can provoke an annihilation either of the otherness in the religion of one’s dialogic partner or of one’s religious identity, it is not desirable for dialogue to reach this annihilating level. Therefore, to avoid the last two forms of destabilization, a certain degree of “maturity”<sup>26</sup> and “personal rootedness”<sup>27</sup> are required from those involved in interreligious dialogue. “Maturity,” in terms of “common sense, realism, humour, solid human maturity, psychological balance and a strength of character,” as well as “a good general culture,”<sup>28</sup> to avoid the self-referential dynamics of assimilation (third form of destabilization), which might hide the “refusal to admit that everything has not been said in the Christian tradition.”<sup>29</sup> “Personal rootedness” within the Church and one’s monastic community, to be equipped to contribute to interreligious dialogue and not respond to the destabilizing encounter with an anxious annihilation of one’s own religious identity (fourth form of destabilization). This maturity and personal rootedness, constituting preventive measures to the temptations of annihilation of the otherness or of one’s own religious identity, will help prevent destabilization at this level, along with creating a “gratitude toward the other and accompanied by a desire to understand the other.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **IV. Per Intrareligious Dialogue – Walking on the Border of Multiple Religious Belonging – Ad Interreligious Dialogue**

Why would one place oneself in such an uncomfortable and destabilizing position? As previously seen, the monastics’ reason is two-fold: to reinvigorate Christian contemplation and to contribute to interreligious dialogue. According to Raimon Panikkar, who largely contributed to the MID,<sup>31</sup> for the latter to be authentic (that is, if one wants to relate to the perspective of one’s dialogic partner), one needs to go through this internally destabilizing process of adopting non-



Christian contemplative practices – that is, stepping out of the egocentric position and assuming someone else’s position. Intrareligious dialogue, which, according to Panikkar, is the desirable path toward an authentic interreligious dialogue,<sup>32</sup> is the dialogue within ourselves, the questioning of our conduct and convictions, which is caused by the desirable destabilizations connected to contemplation and the adoption of contemplative practices from different religious traditions. Therefore, the path toward interreligious dialogue involves a preliminary intrareligious dialogue (*per* intrareligious dialogue *ad* interreligious dialogue).

Thus, first, the monastics commit themselves to interreligious dialogue because they intend to reinvigorate their Christian contemplation by seeking God through the encounter and dialogue with the members of Eastern religious traditions; then, at the same time, they intend to contribute to the interreligious dialogue<sup>33</sup> by respecting the dialogic partner and doing their best to ensure mutual enrichment.<sup>34</sup> However, once immersed in this form of interreligious dialogue, that is, that of religious experience, the realization of not being self-sufficient and the willingness to trust the other<sup>35</sup> leads them not only to share their contemplative traditions, thus facing the first level of destabilization by removing the self from its egocentrism, but also to adopt the dialogic partner’s different contemplative practices, thus facing the second level of destabilization, which means abandoning one’s own contemplative approach and contextual points of reference. Furthermore, I would say that the adoption of this intrareligious approach to interreligious dialogue is crucial in avoiding ego-logical reductions, that is, reducing the differences of my dialogic partner to me and the categorical structures that are typical of my religion, which would block a genuine – free from colonizing and converting intentions – interreligious dialogue from happening.

At this point, a question arises as to whether this “walk outside the walls of one particular human tradition”<sup>36</sup> carried out by, literally, trying to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes – stepping out of the egocentric position and assuming someone else’s position – is to be considered as a form of multiple religious belonging (MRB). Does the adoption of non-Christian meditative practices, in the context of interreligious dialogue, suggest the MRB of the dialogic partners?

I would say that it is a case of walking on the border of MRB without actually crossing it.

However, let me quickly outline three scenarios that might occur when adopting Eastern contemplative practices, in the context of monastic interreligious dialogue, to further clarify the specific focus of this enquiry.

One of the dialogic partners might decide a) to completely abandon their religion and become a proselyte of the religion of their dialogic partner, thus annihilating their own singularity and diversity (fourth form of destabilization); b) to partially embrace the religion of their dialogic partner, while holding some degree of commitment toward their initial religion, thus annihilating part of their own singularity and diversity (fourth form of destabilization); or c) adopting the contemplative practices of the dialogic partner to contribute to the interreligious dialogue and the reinvigoration of the Christian contemplation, whereby the third level of destabilization, the annihilation level, is not reached.

This paper aims solely at responding to the question of case c): Should we consider the adoption of non-Christian meditative practices, in the context of interreligious dialogue, as an instance of MRB?

What matters here is trying to realize whether intrareligious dialogue – the questioning of one’s own conduct and convictions, originating from the adoption

of contemplative paths forged by the other religious tradition in the context of monastic interreligious dialogue – is to be considered as a case of MRB. As I mentioned earlier, I would not describe this experience as MRB, but as bordering MRB and single religious belonging or walking on the border of MRB and single religious belonging.

To avoid undue generalizations, I have confined this paper to the endeavours of the monastic interreligious dialogue, which – I think – borders MRB without actually crossing it. When the adoption of Eastern contemplative practices is moved by the intentions of contributing to interreligious dialogue and reinvigoration of Christian contemplation, there is no annihilation of one's own religious singularity; hence, neither the fourth form of destabilization nor MRB takes place. In other words, there is no resulting and definitive adoption of a new religious system. All that takes place are the first and second forms of destabilization. It is therefore the sharing of a spiritual path with a dialogic partner along the border of different religious contemplative traditions; this sharing sometimes also implies walking a mile (or more) in our interlocutor's shoes and letting them walk in our shoes as well. Nonetheless, this border belongs to neither and both of their religious traditions; there is no crossing of other lands, but a constant discovery of the otherness in the religious tradition of the dialogic partner and the potential otherness of one's own religious tradition.

### Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discriminate between the levels of destabilization that Christian monastics might experience when involved in the interreligious dialogue of religious experience. Furthermore, I try to assess whether the practice of this interreligious dialogue, and in particular the adoption of Eastern contemplative practice, is to be considered as an instance of multiple religious belonging (MRB).

To reach these two objectives, first, thanks to a trilogy of PCID orienting documents, I identify and briefly analyze the PCID's four-fold framework for interreligious dialogue. Second, I locate the position of the monastic interreligious dialogue within this framework, that is, within the dialogue of religious experience.

These preliminary sections allow me to finally describe and discriminate the three levels of destabilization, presenting four different forms of destabilization that the monastics might experience when adopting Eastern contemplative practices in the context of interreligious dialogue. To summarize my argument, I would say that the first level of destabilization is basic, desirable, and inherent to contemplation. It involves a removal of the self from its stable, hence habitual, egocentrism by means of a liberation from those specific instincts that would induce people to sin in order to be ready to be pervaded by the divine work. On the other hand, the second level of destabilization is additional, adventitious, and limitedly desirable: it does not concern every contemplative person, as in the first case, but only those who decide to contribute to the interreligious dialogue – and are to be considered equipped for it – by trying to relate to the perspective of the dialogic partner through the adoption of the partner's different contemplative practices.

If willingly facing the first two levels of destabilization is not enough proof of the monastics' commitment, they might still encounter one further level of destabilization, that is, the annihilation level. At this level, two more forms of destabilization might occur, which share the same annihilating tendency: either annihilating the otherness of one's dialogic partner by assimilation (third form of destabilization) or annihilating one's own religious identity by becoming a proselyte of the interlocutor's religion (fourth form of destabilization). In the final section, I assess whether the adoption of the contemplative practices of one's Eastern interlocutor can be considered an instance of MRB. My

conclusion is that this practice is an instance of walking along the border of MRB without actually crossing it, since it is a temporary adoption of Eastern contemplative methods moved by both an interreligious dialogic intention and the intention to be enriched in one's own contemplative tradition through this experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], 28 October 1965, no. 2, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat\\_ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 33–34.

<sup>3</sup> The Secretariat for Non-Christians was established on 19 May 1964 (soon after Pentecost) at the request of Pope Paul VI, for the dialogue with other religious believers to be promoted and cultivated. Cf. Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*, no. 12, [http://www.pcinterreligious.org/dialogue-in-truth-and-charity\\_246.html](http://www.pcinterreligious.org/dialogue-in-truth-and-charity_246.html). This was in line with *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, proclaimed by the same pope one year later on 28 October 1965 as one of the conclusive documents of the Second Vatican Council, which states: “The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through *dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions*, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2 [emphasis added].

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission*, no. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 28–35.

<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 3.42.

<sup>7</sup> The adjective “orienting” follows the common element found in the subtitles of the three documents. DM: “Reflections and *Orientations* on Dialogue and Mission” [emphasis added]; DP: “Reflections and *Orientations* on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of

Jesus Christ” [emphasis added]; and DTC: “Pastoral *Orientations* for Interreligious Dialogue” [emphasis added].

<sup>8</sup> At the time of drafting and editing of this document (1991–1993), Fr. Pierre de Bethune was moderator of the DIM. Cf. note n. 2 of DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue: References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics*, <http://www.dimmid.org/vertical/sites/%7BD52F3ABF-B999-49DF-BFAB-845A690CF39B%7D/uploads/Bethune.PDF>. He is one of the four directors at large of the DIMMID.

<sup>9</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, introduction.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, “To the Monks of the Christian and Buddhist Traditions” (20 September 1989), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1989/september/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19890920\\_monaci.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1989/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19890920_monaci.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Blée, *The Third Desert*, 127. Even though the preamble of CID consists of the entire description of the “dialogue of religious experience” from DM, its denomination, which actually precedes the description in DM, is not present within this preamble.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/de->

<sup>14</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/stable>

<sup>15</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Col. 3:5; Rom. 6:13; St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, Louis J. Puhl, SJ (trans.), n. 23ff., <http://spex.ignatianspirituality.com/SpiritualExercises/Puhl>.

<sup>18</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, n. 23ff.

<sup>19</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 165.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/adventitious> and <http://www.dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?parola=advenire>.

<sup>22</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 17, and Blée, *The Third Desert*, 134. Aguilar also emphasizes the importance of the reciprocity of dialogue in silence. In particular, he refers to the silence necessary for listening to the dialogic partner's experience: “one listens to the experience of others, one is enriched by others, and at the same time one enriches others through one's experience.” M.I. Aguilar, *Christian Asbrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers: Christian–Hindu Monastic Dialogue in India 1950–1993* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2016), 145.

<sup>23</sup> Blée, *The Third Desert*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*, Introduction, no. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>26</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Blée, *The Third Desert*, 133.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>31</sup> Aguilar, *Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers*, 128–30.

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<sup>32</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>33</sup> DIMMID, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

# **Interreligious Work in the Face of Migration in Europe: From the Perspective of Long-standing Church Experience in Interreligious Work**

**Petra Bosse-Huber**

*This paper was originally a contribution to the workshop on interreligious work in the face of migration in Europe during the 2018 Novi Sad General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches, 2 June 2018.*

Thank you very much for the opportunity to give this short input to the theme of interreligious work in the face of migration in Europe from the perspective of long-standing church experience in interreligious work. I am tempted to put a question mark at the end: Longstanding church experience in interreligious work? I guess it depends on the perspective. Given the 2,000 years of church history, the window of interreligious work has only opened at a rather late point in time. It was in the second half of the last century when the Catholic Church opened the gates for this new approach toward other religions during the Second Vatican Council, namely by the documents *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*. Only a few years later, the World Council of Churches started its dialogue programs and came up with some guidelines on interreligious dialogue at the end of the 1970s. In other words, we are talking about a lifetime, a few decades, of experience.

I know you might answer: dialogue with other religious traditions is as old as Christianity itself. Starting with St Paul and the apostles, the church fathers (and mothers), the mission, expansion, and inculturation of Christian faith in many different cultural, geographical, and religious contexts also had to do with some sort of interreligious work. Not to mention all the well-known scholars at all times who had a serious intellectual interest in the encounter with people of other beliefs.

However, when I say it is a rather short history of interreligious work, I mean the fact that only a few decades ago we reached a point when interreligious encounter and dialogue – and even cooperation and common projects among people of different religious traditions, people of different living faiths – became an official field of activity within the churches and have been initiated and supported by church officials and leaders of the churches themselves.

Second, interreligious work became more and more open to parishioners and the public, and was not reserved only for some specialists or otherwise skilled persons. That is also due to the fact that because of migration, societies have changed: people of different faiths ended up living in the same cities, in the same neighbourhoods, on the same streets, and even in the same houses.

And a third observation: within this timeframe of a few decades, the actual interreligious work seems to be younger than the interreligious dialogue. Communication was first, and cooperation was second. If I am right, there are still some questions today about in what direction extended cooperation among people of different religious identities should go.

These questions cannot be answered only on a practical level; they also touch the very heart of our ecclesiological and theological self-understanding. What about common prayers and spiritual exchange? What about dogmatic controversies and how to deal with differences or opposites that cannot easily be overcome? And what about different cultural influences that make things even more complicated and complex?

This now leads directly into the topic of our workshop: interreligious work in the face of migration in Europe. From a German perspective – but maybe not only from this one – I would say the rise of interreligious dialogue and the increase of migration toward Europe went hand in hand. Otherwise, they are two different developments that do not necessarily belong together. If you take, for example, Christian–Jewish dialogue, you are facing a reality that in its origin has nothing to do with migration. There were Jews in Europe and Germany long before interreligious dialogue developed the way we talk about it today. Therefore, in many cases it is not right to speak of Christian–Jewish dialogue as an intercultural dialogue. In Germany at least, most of the time it has been an *intracultural* dialogue, if it has been a dialogue at all.

Slightly different, of course, is the situation with Christian–Muslim dialogue, since many Muslims from European countries as well as from the Near and Middle East and northern African countries migrated or fled to Europe during the last few decades. However, even here you could say that Muslims were living in Europe long before the modern concept of interreligious dialogue was developed. Christian–Muslim dialogue does not necessarily have to be an intercultural dialogue. This becomes even more obvious if you broaden your perspective beyond Europe and include areas like the Middle East or North Africa, where you can find Christians and Muslims who have been living next door to each other for centuries, so that an intercultural dialogue does not exist at all.

In other words, interreligious work can also be seen independently from migration, since interreligious and intercultural dialogue do not always belong together. However, the situation we are facing these days in terms of migration in Germany is also a challenge for interreligious dialogue.

Here are two examples from the German context: when Germany opened the border

for many refugees from Syria and other countries in 2015, quite a few of them who were of the Muslim faith were looking for shelter in and help from the mosques and Islamic congregations of the country bringing them into Germany – sometimes straining their resources to the limits of what they could do. One mosque in Hamburg opened its prayer room as a night shelter for refugees: the water and electricity bill increased so much within one month that the congregation could not afford it anymore. This problem was solved due to the help of a neighbouring church that supported the mosque.

Another example is the project *Do You Know Who I Am?* which was meant to support the dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Run by a working group of Christian churches together with the Jewish and Muslim community, the project ended a few years ago. Facing the new situation of the refugees from Syria and other countries, this project was reinstated, with the focus becoming initiatives that include refugees in interreligious work. So, for example, if a Christian and a Muslim congregation together have an idea of how to help with the integration of refugees, asylum seekers, and others into society, they can apply for support through the project and will receive government funding for their initiative.

These two examples show that interreligious dialogue and networking between different faith communities can be effective preparation for times of additional challenge. It is hard to imagine that this would have worked without the prior experience of cooperation among mosques, churches, and Jewish institutions. Interreligious work is preventive work for times when things get worse or – to say it in a positive way – when things are more challenging.

So, how to summarize the churches' experience in interreligious work, whether it is long-standing or not? The rise of people with different living faiths in a society

requires an increased need for interreligious work, even though interreligious dialogue can and should be an issue no matter how small or big another religious community is.

Although it is too early to say in what way the recent and ongoing migration toward Europe will change interreligious dialogue and work in the long run, the first impression is that stable interreligious networks within a society are helping to cope with the problems that might occur.

Finally, interreligious work is a learning experience. This means it is also a field of trial and error. The more experience you gain, the easier it gets to sense what is helpful and what is not. And, of course, this process needs to be reflected by theological and ecclesiological thinking. The existence of people of other religious beliefs and the question of interacting with them is an issue churches have dealt with for many centuries. Fairly new is the approach to doing this in accordance with the right of freedom of religion and with sufficient theological support of interreligious dialogue in general.

Right now, I see that the greatest challenge in continuing the way of interreligious dialogue arises when people tend to put the emphasis on a religiously or ethnically homogenous society. From those points of view, interreligious work and work with migrants are not very welcome, since they both remind us that the world we are living in is a plural one.

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# A Triple Engagement to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons

**Peniel Rajkumar**

*Full text of the address presented at the 30th Anniversary of the Interreligious Prayer Meeting for World Peace on Mt Hiei: Jews, Christians and Muslims.*

Dear brothers and sisters: Let me begin by acknowledging how deeply honoured and humbled I am to be here today at this important moment. I bring greetings from the World Council of Churches on behalf of our general secretary, the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, to you on this occasion.

We are gathered here today, almost 72 years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as inheritors of the nuclear age – an era of promise but also of peril, of great opportunity and greater responsibility.

History has taught us that the case for promoting nuclear energy remains questionable on environmental, ethical, and economic grounds. Exorbitant investment costs, the possibility of error, economic expediencies which compromise on safety measures, political leadership which is keen to invest in nuclear energy while assuming zero liability, and the disproportionate impact of ionizing radiation on women and girls are some of the issues that merit careful consideration when exploring the issue of nuclear energy. The nuclear disasters of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima confirm that not only nuclear weapons but also sources of civil nuclear energy have the capacity to trigger a nuclear disaster.

Issues around nuclear energy and especially nuclear weapons tend to strike at the heart of the moral fabric of our common existence. The ethical loopholes around nuclear energy and the moral bankruptcy around nuclear weapons confirm what Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out long ago: “When scientific power outruns spiritual power, we end up with guided

missiles and misguided men.” (And let me hasten to add that I do not hesitate to use the gender-exclusive term “men” here!)

Today, as we discern what it would entail for the world to move toward the total elimination of nuclear weapons and the purposeful phase-out of nuclear power plants, we need more than ever what I call a triple engagement – an engagement of the head, the heart, and the hands.

## **Engagement of the Head – A New Moral Imagination**

By engagement of the head I mean a new moral imagination. Over the past 72 years, the moral imagination of many has been held hostage in the name of deterrence. Powerful nations have normativized nuclear weapons by ensuring a persistent presence for them in national security psychology, military budgets, and force deployments, in nationalistic symbols and rhetoric. In a conference such as ours, the systems of belief behind these phenomena – tellingly called “nuclear doctrines” – should give us pause.

Engagement of the head demands the practice of discernment at a societal level. Most governments, and many citizens, are complicit in the wilful confusion of motives and consequences that is used to justify both military and civilian uses of nuclear energy. After its 2013 Assembly in Busan, the World Council of Churches characterized the issue this way:

*Nuclear power is the pathway to acquiring the equipment, materials and technology necessary for the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Promoted as “atoms for peace” and as “peaceful uses of nuclear energy”, the expansion of nuclear power has facilitated the spread of nuclear weapons. The civilian use of nuclear power can hide military intentions and tempt countries to reprocess*



*plutonium from nuclear waste for use in nuclear weapons.*<sup>1</sup>

Discernment must inform our common future. Discernment examines stewardship and safety as well as strategy. “Military and civilian uses of nuclear technology both produce large quantities of poisonous materials that do not exist in nature and are among the world’s worst forms of environmental contamination,” the WCC statement adds (para 37).

May I pause on this point and invite us to exercise some discernment? “Some of the by-products [of civil and military nuclear energy use] pose a threat to living things for millions of years.<sup>2</sup> No known options for long-term storage or disposal of nuclear waste are capable of isolating nuclear waste from the environment for the timeframe of its inherent hazards.” (para 9)<sup>3</sup> By what logic are we authorized to leave such a legacy? Is not this point alone enough to disqualify nuclear energy use in power plants and weapons?

“Responsible and inclusive stewardship of energy today must take greater account of the common good, the integrity of creation and humanity’s future. Energy sources must be safe, efficient and renewable. ... Present uses must not create serious problems for the future. Today’s energy must be suitable, in effect, to serve as tomorrow’s energy as well.” (para 28)

Universal commitments such as public health, justice, and sustainability are helpful in assessing energy policy as a whole and in comparing nuclear and other sources of energy. Such commitments enable nuclear issues to be treated within a cross-cutting framework of values.

Credible religious precepts and practices should help to shape that values framework. Also, on an issue of such general public relevance, teachings in one world religion should resonate with values expressed in other religious traditions.

“The use of the term ‘safe’ for the nuclear industry has proven to be unsupportable. Serious accidents that were judged to be highly unlikely have occurred repeatedly.<sup>4</sup> The grave consequences of such accidents have been routinely ignored or dismissed by the governments and corporations involved.” (para 13)

“Setting ‘acceptable’ levels for exposure to the ionizing radiation and chemical toxins released during nuclear accidents and nuclear tests has proved to be misleading and dangerous. After Chernobyl, Fukushima and other accidents, the ‘acceptable’ level of contamination was simply raised in order to minimize the perceived seriousness of the event and to deflect public criticism.” (para 14)

In order to provide cover for our political compulsions and economic ambitions, our arms (trade) industry has successfully marketed the lie that the only way to make the world safe is to make it more dangerous by increasing our nuclear arsenals (supplies). Discernment is also needed here: humanity’s normal unwillingness to kill has been corrupted by the myth of pre-emptive violence. We have fostered a moral environment where one cannot imagine living without the possibility of killing and being killed.

Such a context demands a different moral imagination – an imagination which refuses the divisive rhetoric of “us” and “them,” which depersonalizes the other and dehumanizes the self. We need an imagination that helps us understand our well-being in terms of our inter-being – our interrelatedness. Faith traditions, which have at their core the interconnectedness of all life, are the womb out of which such an imagination can be born. This imagination ascribes value not only to the life within, but also to the life outside and the life in between us.

We need to nurture a moral imagination which refuses to become part of our own dehumanization by putting greater trust in

weapons than in our common humanity. This imagination will help our leaders to understand that “to plan a strategy around such weapons is to be defeated by them,” to use the words of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. We need to understand that nuclear wars are battles of the soul which destroy the soul of both the destroyed and the destroyer. With each nuclear weapon produced or tested we squander our capacity and responsibility to be human.

### **Engagement of the Heart – Compassionate Conviction**

Our engagement of the head should be matched by an engagement of the heart – a conviction driven by compassion.

Much of the procrastination around the total elimination of nuclear weapons emerges from an attitude which sees nuclear weapons as a futuristic threat. Understanding nuclear weapons as a threat we can possibly escape in our lifetime often dampens the will to act NOW.

The conviction to act can be expedited if we see nuclear weapons as threatening our very present. For this we need hearts of compassion which see the exorbitant price that the most vulnerable among us pay for our morbid addiction to nuclear stockpiling. The siphoning of intellectual and financial resources and political will toward the building and testing of nuclear arms adds more than insult to injury to the festering wounds of our present – our unimaginable poverty, widespread famine, and unsafe drinking water – all of which will have killed several people before I even complete this sentence. We need to be convinced that a nuclear arms race in a world where hundreds die each minute due to preventable reasons is the worst form of blood sport – where the death and blood of the innocent merely serve to entertain. The moral horrors of contributing to mass deaths each minute should move our hearts, minds, and wills to invest not in death but in life.

So far I have spoken of engagement of the head (moral imagination) and engagement of the heart (compassionate conviction). Now it is time to talk of engagement of the hands – committed cooperation.

### **Engagement of the Hands – Committed Cooperation**

Today we stand on the threshold of hope. On the 7th of July this year, 122 nations signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading to their total elimination. Making this hope a reality requires an engagement of the hands – a committed cooperation built around solidarity. Religious communities need to work with policy makers, diplomats, and civil society organizations. The new treaty will open for signature on 20 September 2017, when heads of state and ministers attend the UN General Assembly. Your governments should be there. If your government is like mine and relies on nuclear weapons – its own, or those of a foreign power – the treaty’s signing is an occasion to help your government understand the global public commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons. The treaty will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it, globalizing the norm that nuclear weapons must be eliminated as the only way to ensure they are never used again.

To that end, it is important for us to be in solidarity with the voices from the margins – those most vulnerable to nuclear violence. We need to listen when people like the atomic bomb survivor Toshiko Saeki, who experienced her family being wiped out, say, “War does not only destroy things and kill people, but shatters the hearts of people as well.”

Engagement of the hands means that the broad interfaith consensus around nuclear weapons should be translated into common action. Imagine the impact if Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, and people of other faiths would raise a common, transnational call for each

government and all governments to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Signing and ratifying a treaty of this character are actions that all can understand.

We need to master the art of collaboration. Several faith communities still struggle to work with our religious neighbours on projects of common concern unless we have the lead role. We suffer from what the Korean theologian Heup Young Kim calls “host-ility” or the “will-to-host” always.

Engagement of the hands requires us to shed the temptation to always be the primary change makers and learn to play the supportive role to change makers. Too often, wanting to be the main actors can be a way of exerting control. It can emerge from fears that accepting the gifts of others and cooperating with them can make us powerless – and we genuinely fear the loss of control involved. The need of the hour is to globalize collaboration by working hand in hand.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps it is only in the case of nuclear weapons that the saying that “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter” becomes true in a literal sense. We can no longer be silent. Now is the time to walk the

talk. In a world where it often seems that there is enough religion to make us hate one another but not enough to make us love one another, we need to walk together. We need to walk hand in hand, with hearts moved with compassion and heads gripped by a fresh imagination that will make a new world in which not some lives, but all life, matters.

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<sup>1</sup> World Council of Churches, *Statement towards a Nuclear-free World* (7 July 2014),

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/statement-towards-a-nuclear-free-world>. Subsequent references to the statement will be noted in the text.

<sup>2</sup> See background paper: Mary Lou Harley, “Timeframe of Care” (United Church of Canada, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See also Canadian Nuclear Waste Management Organization, *Final Study: Choosing a Way Forward* (2005), <http://www.nwmo.ca/studyreport>.

<sup>4</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, “International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale,” <http://www-ns.iaea.org/tech-areas/emergency/ines.asp>.

# Christians and Buddhists in Dialogue: An Overview of the Past and the Present

Elizabeth J. Harris

*This paper was originally presented at the Anglican–Lutheran–Buddhist Consultation in January 2017 in Yangon, Myanmar.*

In some respects, Buddhism is radically different from Christianity. Nevertheless, the touching points between the two religions are numerous. Both religions are acutely aware that there is something wrong in human societies. Christians see the cause as alienation from God and God’s will for humankind. Buddhists point to the greed, hatred, and delusion within the human mind and heart. The practical path out of this situation, however, is remarkably similar in both religions and concerns eradicating clinging both to the self and to greed for money and power. In the history of Christian–Buddhist encounter, however, these touching points have not always been seen or appreciated.

In presenting an overview of Buddhist–Christian encounter in the past and in the present, I take an empirical approach. I first focus on three cameos of Buddhist–Christian encounter from different historical periods and geographical areas: China and Japan in the pre-modern era; Sri Lanka and Myanmar under Western colonialism; and the growth of formal dialogue in the 20th century. I then briefly survey three areas within which positive Buddhist–Christian encounter is taking place now: inter-monastic dialogue; social activism; and among women. Lastly, I touch on two areas within which tensions have arisen: namely, over the issues of monotheism and “unethical” conversions. In doing this, I draw on several articles that I have written on the topic in the last two decades, including a chapter for the handbook *Understanding Interreligious Relations*.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important points that arises from my overview is that it is impossible to isolate one model or one pattern of Buddhist–Christian encounter. In each context, factors such as geographical location, colonial history, power relations, and the school of Buddhism or Christianity involved have conditioned the encounter that has taken place. However, one significant principle weaves through my illustrations: where courtesy is offered to Buddhism by Christians, courtesy is always returned, but when contempt is shown, defensive opposition is mounted.

## **Buddhist–Christian Encounter in China and Japan in the Pre-modern Era**

Christianity most probably first entered China through members of the Church of the East, possibly from Syria, who arrived in the T’ang Dynasty (618–907) from the sixth century onwards. On the evidence of manuscripts about “Jesus the Messiah” found among the cache of documents first discovered at the beginning of the 20th century in a cave at Dunhuang, on the Silk Road,<sup>2</sup> Martin Palmer has argued that between the seventh and 11th centuries, the Church of the East sought to communicate Christianity in China through the thought forms of Daoism and Buddhism, and that this resulted in a synthesis of Dao, Christ, and Buddha – a “Taoist Christianity.”<sup>3</sup> Lai and von Brück, in their history of Buddhist–Christian encounter, largely concur with this, pointing to areas of natural convergence between Buddhism and the Church of the East in China, such as the presence in both of an ascetic morality and monasticism, facts that led the Confucian-dominated Chinese state in the eighth and ninth centuries to place Christianity alongside Buddhism in state persecutions.<sup>4</sup> The two religions actually worked together

during this period on the translation of Christian and Buddhist texts into Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

During this period, therefore, there was not only respect and mutual learning between Buddhists and Christians, but also a sense of shared victimhood under Confucianism. Evidence of this also comes from iconography. Kenneth Fleming, for instance, points out that the Church of the East sometimes depicted the cross resting on a lotus flower, an important Buddhist symbol, and that Christian figures have been found in Buddhist caves in eastern Turkestan.<sup>6</sup>

“Taoist Christianity” in China did not survive as a separate religion, and the knowledge of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism gained by the Church of the East did not reach other parts of the Christian family. The next Chinese experience of Christians came in the 16th century, with the arrival of a group of Jesuits in 1582, headed by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). Ricci at first avoided confrontation, choosing what would now be described as inculturation. He and his colleagues wore Chinese dress and sought elite patronage. They appealed to the power of Christian ritual and adopted Chinese terminology, such as the use of the term “Learning from Heaven.”<sup>7</sup> They also challenged Buddhists to debate and, according to Lai and von Brück, successfully engaged some key Buddhist scholars.<sup>8</sup> Both elite and rural converts were gained.<sup>9</sup>

Buddhists and Daoists, however, in the end opposed the Jesuits. According to Brockey, the main reason was the eventual Jesuit insistence that those who engaged in Christian rituals should reject their former practices.<sup>10</sup> Reading between the lines, it is obvious that the Chinese had not been separating the two religious systems, but rather holding them together. The Jesuit insistence, therefore, was seen as a failure of respect and courtesy. Some Buddhists trusted what Brockey describes as the “built-in resistance of the Chinese religious landscape,” which was generally non-

exclusivist, to do the task of resisting the Jesuits.<sup>11</sup> Others in the 17th century, however, launched a defensive response, which led to Jesuits being expelled from the province of Fukien.<sup>12</sup>

Japanese Buddhists also encountered the Jesuits through the person of Francis Xavier, who arrived with colleagues in 1549. They also opted for non-confrontation and the use of Buddhist terminology to communicate Christianity. Xavier changed course, however, when exactly the same thing happened in Japan as in China: Japanese Buddhists began to see Christianity as part of Buddhism, something that could be inclusively slotted into their existing practice. He therefore started to condemn Buddhism, causing Buddhists to respond with what Notto Thelle has termed “aggressive propaganda against the foreign intruder.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, when courtesy and respect for Buddhist practice was no longer present, courtesy was not returned. At the beginning of the 17th century, Christianity in Japan was proscribed. Significantly, Buddhists were given responsibility by the state for ensuring this would happen. Christianity was allowed to return only in the 19th century, when a more positive relationship between Buddhism and Christianity eventually developed.<sup>14</sup>

### **Buddhist–Christian Encounter in Sri Lanka and Myanmar under Colonialism**

In presenting my second cameo, I draw on several of my previous publications, since this topic has been a major focus of my scholarly research.<sup>15</sup> In Sri Lanka, British imperialists were preceded by the Portuguese, who eventually controlled most of the maritime areas of the island, and the Dutch, who likewise administered the maritime areas. Research into these two periods reveals that Buddhists developed a critique of the Christianity of their conquerors, expressed in folktales that represented Christians as uncivilized beef-eaters and Jesus as akin to a demon. Sinhala manuscripts from the Dutch period,

translated by Young and Senanayake, contain narratives that undermined both Hinduism in its Saivite form and Christianity. In one narrative, for instance, Jesus was represented as the son of Māra, the embodiment of evil temptation in Buddhism. He was low caste, drank alcohol, ate meat, and terrorized.<sup>16</sup> A discourse of contempt toward Christianity was present in these stories, conditioned by the power relationships of imperialism but communicated from village to village outside formal imperial relationships. At the level of formal communications between Buddhists and Christians in this period, there is no doubt in my mind that Buddhists showed outward respect, particularly when asked to describe Buddhism, as happened under Willem Falck, Dutch governor between 1765 and 1785.<sup>17</sup>

In the British period, which stretched from the 1790s to 1948, a complex dynamic emerged, conditioned by the principle that I have already mentioned: when courtesy was shown toward Buddhism, courtesy was returned; when contempt was shown, confrontation and polemic were returned. A number of Christian British civil servants, for instance, became scholars of Buddhism or Pāli; to these scholars, Buddhists always showed respect, returning the respect that was shown to them. Among these were George Turnour (1799–1843), Robert Childers (1838–1876), T.W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), and John Frederick Dickson, who worked in Sri Lanka between 1859 and 1885.<sup>18</sup> If Buddhists had met only these Christians in the 19th century, Buddhist–Christian relations in Sri Lanka would have been very different. There was, however, another group of Christians in the country: independent evangelical Protestant missionaries who arrived after 1805 and, driven by an exclusivist soteriology, did all in their power to undermine Buddhism to gain converts. Products of the Evangelical Revival in Britain and the independent missionary societies to which the Revival gave birth, they considered it an act of compassion to convert Buddhists, so saving

their souls from what they were convinced would be “an awful eternity,” namely, an eternity in hell.

In 2006, I argued that Buddhists offered five “faces” to these missionaries: “hospitality and courtesy; willingness to engage in dialogue about religion and to co-operate if mutual benefit was possible; a polite acceptance and tolerance that sometimes masked distrust or even contempt; the wish for reasoned, structured debate to prove the superiority of Buddhism and direct confrontation and opposition.”<sup>19</sup> I further argued that, although all five were present throughout the century, the first three were dominant when the missionaries first arrived, and the last two at the century’s end, after Buddhists had experienced contempt from Christians. In 2012, I added another “face”: that of “skilled pragmatic decision-making about the best way to survive under imperialism.”<sup>20</sup>

When the missionaries first arrived, for instance, the majority of Buddhists, including members of the monastic Sangha, in spite of an ongoing awareness of folk narratives that subverted Christianity, sought a respectful and pragmatic co-existence with the Christian missionaries that could extend to cooperation if mutual interests were served. The missionaries, however, did not reciprocate. Their preaching and writings condemned Buddhist philosophy and village practice as atheistic, nihilistic, pessimistic, irrational, linked with the demonic, and morally impotent. To take just one example that I have quoted before, William Bridgenell, writing in 1840, exclaimed:

*The utter extinction of being is the acme of Budhistical felicity! The utter extinction of the passions is the acme of Budhistical virtue! According to Budhu’s doctrine, the latter ensures the former. What a degrading and misleading system! Even with respect to the right regulation of the passions, and the suppression of all that is immoderate and evil, Buddhists ‘do greatly err.’<sup>21</sup>*

This and changes to the geography of Sri Lankan villages through the increased building of churches and Christian schools gradually changed Buddhist attitudes. The missionaries moved from being a presence that could be tolerated, and even respected, to being a threat to the existence of Buddhism. And any threat to Buddhism's existence in the island, within Sri Lankan Buddhist consciousness, had to be resisted through defensive action. One early act of resistance was to address petitions to the British governing authorities, objecting to missionary methods and suggesting a code of conduct based on respect.<sup>22</sup> When this did not produce results, members of the monastic Sangha began to write reasoned responses to Christian accusations against Buddhism, which were taken from village to village on traditional ola leaves.<sup>23</sup> A key moment came when Pāli scholar and Wesleyan missionary Daniel J. Gogerly (1792–1862) argued, in 1848, for the superiority of Christianity in a Sinhala publication, *Kristiyāni Prajñāpti* (The Evidences and Doctrines of the Christian Religion). Buddhists again responded to this through reasoned argument on ola leaf manuscripts, few of which have survived.

When Buddhists gained printing presses in 1855 and 1862, however, their exchanges with Christians became more polemical and populist, under the leadership of revivalist monks such as Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda, who, in 1862, founded the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism, in antagonistic response to the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.<sup>24</sup> Buddhist–Christian debates took place, the last of which was at Pānadurē in 1873. Significantly, Guṇānanda, at the Pānadurē Debate, threw exactly the same accusations that the missionaries had made against Buddhism back at Christianity, arguing, through a literalist reading of the Bible, that Christians worshipped a demon-like God. Why else could the murderer Moses, or Jesus, a being whose birth was accompanied by the killing of children, be revered?<sup>25</sup> The point had been reached when the hope for

reciprocated courtesy on behalf of Buddhists had been replaced by the reality of reciprocal demonization.

After the debate, polemical Buddhist tracts on Christianity continued: for example, *Mityadusti kolomak* (A comedy of false views) and *Henapotha bevat henapolla* (A lightning strike or thunderbolt against Christianity). This trend culminated in the writings of the Buddhist revivalist Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), who condemned Christianity as “unsuited for a civilised Aryan community.”<sup>26</sup>

Defence in the face of threat also characterized the Buddhist response to Christianity in Myanmar in the early decades of the 20th century. Britain gained complete control over Myanmar in 1885. Missionaries from the West, however, had been active well before this. American Baptists had arrived in 1813 and The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had established a Diocese of Rangoon in 1877.<sup>27</sup> Wesleyan Methodists arrived in Upper Burma in 1887. As missionaries had done in Sri Lanka, they accused Burmese Buddhists of being “indifferent” or “lazy,” because they did not seem to realize that Buddhism and Christianity were incompatible. As Leigh rightly pointed out, however, “‘Indifference’ was the gentlest way in which the Burman could express resistance” to missionary attempts to convert them.<sup>28</sup> It was a form of outward tolerance that masked suspicion.

Some Burmese Buddhist monks, however, influenced by Sri Lankan revivalism and aided by Western converts to Buddhism in Myanmar who were critical of the missionary enterprise, such as the Irish monk U Dhammaloka and the English monk Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett), began to pressure lay Buddhists to resist Christian schools and preaching more forcibly.<sup>29</sup> Alicia Turner has documented the key role that lay Buddhist organizations also played in Myanmar at this time in reviving Buddhism and resisting missionary work.<sup>30</sup>

Leigh argues that contempt and intolerance were replacing “indifference” soon after the turn of the century and that this increased in the 1920s, led by Burmese monks such as U Thawbita and U Tiloka. Missionaries were heckled at open-air Christian services. Christian schooling was undermined in different ways and Christians were challenged to public debate.<sup>31</sup> As in Sri Lanka, the contempt that Buddhists perceived in the missionaries toward Buddhism was seen as a threat to the Buddhist heritage of the country, demanding defence. However, as in Sri Lanka, where courtesy was shown to Buddhism, courtesy was returned. One Western account that refused to accept the negative missionary views was H. Fielding Hall’s *The Soul of a People*.<sup>32</sup>

This is the legacy that Buddhists and Christians inherit now in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and it continued into the 20th century. I have had personal experience of this in Sri Lanka, and I am not alone. For instance, in May 1969, Tissa Balasuriya O.M.I. (1924–2013), a Sri Lankan Roman Catholic priest, publicly called on Christians in the press to recognize that the Christian treatment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka had been wrong. He urged appreciation of Buddhism and presented the Buddha as a man of deep, God-centred spirituality. A mass of press correspondence followed, not all of which was positive. Many Buddhists, for instance, questioned his rather unfortunate words that “the Buddha was surely in communion with God.”<sup>33</sup> Buddhism, after all, is a non-theistic religion. Others distrusted his call for brotherhood between Buddhists and Christians, fearing that it was a proselytizing strategy. One wrote, “The kiss of the Vatican is the kiss of Death. Let us Buddhists guard against these subtle moves by the Catholic Church.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Growth of Formal Dialogue in the 20th Century**

During the 20th century, moves were taken by both Christians and Buddhists toward greater rapprochement. One of the earliest

Christian centres that sought to engage positively with Buddhism was founded in 1959 in Japan as the National Christian Council Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, with a journal, *Japanese Religions*. Then, in 1976, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture was founded at Nanzan University, a Japanese Roman Catholic institution. Between 1982 and 2005, it published the journal *Inter-Religio*.<sup>35</sup> At roughly the same time, two Jesuit priests, the German Hugo M. Enomiya Lassalle (1898–1990) and the Japanese J. Kakichi Kadowaki (b. 1930), were discovering that Zen meditation could contribute positively to Christian spirituality. Both wrote books on this subject, which influenced other Roman Catholics globally, leading to Zen Buddhist practice becoming a key element in the spiritual practice of some Western Christians.<sup>36</sup>

In Sri Lanka, a remarkable group of Christians arose in the mid-20th century, all of whom sought to roll back the mistrust of the colonial period. It included Lynn de Silva (1918–1982; Methodist), Yohan Devananda (1928–2016; Anglican), Aloysius Pieris s.j. (b. 1934; Roman Catholic), and Michael Rodrigo o.m.i. (1927–1987; Roman Catholic). De Silva called for an informed debate between Buddhists and Christians and was instrumental in enabling the Centre for Religion and Society in Colombo to include interreligious dialogue. Devananda established a Christian ashram, Devasaran ārāmaya, which drew on Buddhist forms of spirituality. It eventually became an interfaith community with a strong emphasis on action for social justice. Pieris called Christians to be “baptized” in the waters of Asian spirituality as Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, and set up a centre for interreligious encounter and research, Tulana Research Centre, about seven miles outside Colombo. Rodrigo, toward the end of his life, went to live in an entirely Buddhist village in the south of Sri Lanka to engage in a dialogue of life; he was tragically killed there in 1987.<sup>37</sup> In 1974, the successor to the Centre for Religion and



Society, the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, began a new series of the journal *Dialogue*, which was to place itself at the cutting edge of Buddhist–Christian exchange, edited by de Silva and Pieris.

A notable example of a Buddhist move toward rapprochement with Christianity and, indeed, Western philosophy was the Kyōto School in Japan, founded by Nishido Kitarō (1870–1945). Kitarō engaged both with Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327) and with Western philosophy. In the light of this engagement, the Kyōto School reinterpreted and re-envisioned Zen Buddhism, particularly its emphasis on the non-duality of liberation or enlightenment. For example, Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), another member of the School, presented a paper in Heidelberg in 1938 on Nietzsche and Eckhart; according to Ueda, it encouraged Christians to rethink the ultimate nature of reality, as embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the light of the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*); it was both nothingness and freedom, an “into-nothingness-and-out-of-nothingness.”<sup>38</sup> Masao Abe, a Zen Buddhist influenced by the Kyōto School, became a further key figure, arguing that the God of Christianity was fundamentally self-emptying, implying that Christians, being made in God’s image, were also empty of self, using Zen concepts to interpret Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

Masao Abe, in fact, was key to a Buddhist–Christian dialogue that happened in America and influenced Europe. In 1980, David Chappell (1940–2004), a Christian who identified as a Buddhist later in his life,<sup>40</sup> started an East–West Project from the University of Hawai‘i, which organized academic conferences that brought Buddhism into dialogue with Christianity and other religions. A Japan chapter of the project began in 1982, becoming the Japan Society for Buddhist–Christian Studies. At the Project’s second conference in 1983, Abe and John Cobb, a Christian theologian, started the International Buddhist–Christian Theological Encounter, which came to be

known as the Cobb-Abe group. It continued for 20 years.<sup>41</sup> At the 1987 conference at Berkeley, the Society for Buddhist–Christian Studies was formed; it has pioneered new forms of academic dialogue between the two religions through conferences; its journal, *Buddhist–Christian Studies*; other publications; and its website. In 1997, the European Network of Buddhist–Christian Studies began in Europe. Its main activity is to hold a biennial conference on a theme central to Buddhist–Christian studies, the papers of which are published.

The 20th century, therefore, saw the birth of positive, structured dialogues between Buddhists and Christians, and also what could be called a dialogue of spirituality, in the experiences of Michael Rodrigo, Aloysius Pieris, and the Jesuits who became close to Zen. It also saw the birth of what has been called dual belonging, namely people who call themselves Christian–Buddhist or Buddhist–Christian because they draw in equal measure from the two religions in their spiritual life. The most insightful analysis of this phenomenon is found in Drew’s work.<sup>42</sup>

### Three Positive Examples of Buddhist–Christian Encounter

I pass now to three positive contemporary expressions of Buddhist–Christian encounter: inter-monastic dialogue, social engagement, and dialogue between Buddhist and Christian women. In doing this, I draw on my contribution to the book *Understanding Interreligious Relations*.

#### Inter-monastic dialogue

There is a possibility that Buddhist practice influenced the beginnings of Christian monasticism. Additionally, inter-monastic dialogue most certainly took place in China when missionaries from the Church of the East were there. Formal Buddhist–Christian inter-monastic exchanges in the modern period, however, began with the work of the Christian monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Merton died through accidental

electrocution at a meeting of Inter-Monastic Aid (AIM), a Christian body, in Bangkok, at which he had encouraged his monastic colleagues “to devote themselves to serious engagement with the spiritual riches of the East.”<sup>43</sup> His challenge was taken up posthumously. In 1973, AIM convened a consultation between Christian and Buddhist monks, which resulted in a series of East–West spiritual exchanges between Zen and Christian monks. Two committees or commissions for this dialogue were then formed in 1978: one based in North America, with a focus on the Tibetan tradition, and the other based in Belgium and France, with a focus on Zen. Further commissions developed. Today, inter-monastic dialogue is firmly established within Christian monasticism, both in Asia and in the West, and there is an online international journal, *Dilatato Corde*.<sup>44</sup> Buddhists have generally responded with grace to this largely Christian initiative, but it would be fair to say that the dialogue has been asymmetrical, with Christians showing more enthusiasm for it than Buddhists, although Buddhists who have spent time at Christian monasteries have gained a greater understanding of Christianity, particularly of the Christian contemplative tradition.

### Social activism

Buddhism, from its beginnings in India, has stressed the importance of compassionate action to cut through suffering. Christianity, drawing on its Jewish heritage, has stressed action to address injustice, poverty, and deprivation. In the 20th century, some Eastern and Western Buddhists, in reaction to forms of Buddhist practice that ignored compassionate action in favour of meditation, coined the term “engaged Buddhism.” The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh was one of them. Together with Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933), a lay Siamese Buddhist, and others, he co-founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in 1989, which is still active, publishing the journal *Seeds of Peace*.

Engaged Buddhists have drawn from models of social activism in Christianity and have invited people of other religions into collaboration with them. For instance, Western Buddhist feminist Rita Gross (1943–2015) claimed in her pioneering book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, that “the prophetic voice” had been missing in Buddhism. In doing this, she realized that she was drawing on Christian and Jewish tradition, and welcomed it.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh was influenced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Merton. Sivaraksa has invited Christian allies to the Spirit in Education (SEM) conferences he has held in Thailand<sup>46</sup> and has been active in the Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development. Christians have also been welcome participants in the pioneering Dhammayietras (Walks of Truth) in Cambodia, pioneered by the Buddhist monk and peace activist Mahā Ghosānanda (1929–2007).<sup>47</sup> In the United Kingdom, Buddhist participants, particularly from Japanese peace groups, have cooperated with Christians in demonstrations against nuclear weapons. Cooperative action in the sphere of social action and service is proving to be one of the most fruitful areas of Buddhist–Christian encounter.

### Dialogue between Buddhist and Christian women

With reference to dialogue between Buddhist and Christian women, let me simply give a handful of examples. Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a Western Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition, has told me more than once that she has found greater understanding for her monastic vocation from Christian nuns than from some Western Buddhists, particularly those who have rejected the lay/monastic distinction.<sup>48</sup> Her experience is not isolated. Buddhist and Christian nuns are working together in several countries, as are lay Buddhist and Christian women. I have personal experience of this in Britain and have heard evidence of it in conferences organized by Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha), an international Buddhist women’s

organization, founded in 1987. Although Sakyadhita does not focus on interreligious understanding, some Christians, including me, have attended its conferences, and a number of its members are actively involved in grassroots interfaith work. At the 1998 conference, held in Cambodia, for instance, American convert to Buddhism Beth Goldering, in a session on “Dialogues in Religious Diversity,” spoke about her work among the poor in Cambodia with people of other religions, stating, “When I look for spiritual community, I need to find it in a wider context than simply the Buddhist community.”<sup>49</sup> I must admit I have often used this sentence when speaking about the benefits of Buddhist–Christian encounter.

One of the finest published examples of honest Buddhist–Christian dialogue, moreover, featured two feminist women: Rita Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Both were members of the Society of Buddhist–Christian Studies. The dialogue covered their own routes to Buddhist–Christian encounter, their critiques of their own traditions, what they found liberating in their own traditions, what they found inspiring in the other tradition, and what resources each tradition possessed to aid a sustainable future for the planet.<sup>50</sup> A sensitive appraisal of what the two women achieved, with a particular emphasis on Ruether, was written by Peggy Morgan.<sup>51</sup>

## Tension-creating Topics

### Monotheism

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion in that it does not place a creator God at the centre of its cosmology. In some Theravāda Buddhist countries, however, a number of gods are recognized. These, however, lie below the Buddha and are presented as in need of his teaching. This goes back to India in the fifth century BCE, when Buddhists, in debate with Brahmanism, demoted the brahmanical gods. From that time, the question of God or Godhead has created tension between Buddhists and members of other religions. For this reason, I made it a

case study in my contribution to *Understanding Interreligious Relations*; I draw from this now.

I began with the experience of the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), who arrived in Tibet in 1716 and studied Buddhist texts under Tibetans. Significantly but not unsurprisingly, he found that the courteous Tibetans had difficulty with his belief in an eternal creator God.<sup>52</sup> I then passed to the 19th-century colonial narrative that I have outlined, when Christian missionaries condemned Buddhists for their lack of belief in a creator God, and Buddhists, particularly in the latter decades of the 19th century, utterly condemned Christian theistic belief.

Anagārika Dharmapāla, for instance, argued that the God of Judaism and Christianity was violent and capricious.<sup>53</sup> He named him “the deity of Horeb” and condemned the exclusivist soteriology of the evangelical missionaries as “monstrously diabolical,” mainly because it claimed that God condemned sinners to hell for eternity.<sup>54</sup> Allan Bennett, whom I mentioned in the context of Myanmar, used a different argument, the argument from theodicy, writing this of the person who learns that life is *dukkha* or pain-filled: “If he had faith in God, – in some great Being who had devised the Universe, he can no longer hold it; for any being, now he clearly sees, who could have devised a Universe wherein was all this wanton war, this piteous mass of pain coterminous with life, must have been a Demon, not a God.”<sup>55</sup> These words were repeated to me in 1997 by a Western Buddhist monk, who added, “The weakness of Christianity is its God-belief.”<sup>56</sup>

In the 20th century, however, more positive perspectives toward the Christian concept of God arose among Buddhists, as they were drawn into dialogue with Christians. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–1993), for instance, a Thai scholar, moved from suspicion of Christianity to the conviction that different religions should work together. In 1967, he gave the Sinclair

Thompson Memorial Lecture at the Thailand Theological Seminary, Chiang Mai, on Christianity and Buddhism. In it, he demonstrated knowledge of the New Testament and, controversially, equated *Dhamma* (when seen as the Law of Nature) with God and the Tao of Taoism, declaring that if an interpretation of a religious word led to disharmony, it should be regarded as wrong.<sup>57</sup>

The Kyōto School, as I have explained, created a different parallel, namely between God and *śūnyatā* or emptiness, the concept that Zen Buddhism links with the experience of liberation. Masao Abe originally had problems with the Christian concept of God, but eventually stated that “Where Buddhism talks about Emptiness, *Śūnyatā*, roughly speaking it may correspond to the Christian mystic notion of ‘Das Nichts’ or ‘Godhead’.”<sup>58</sup> To cite just one more example, Ayya Khema (1923–1997), a German-born convert to Buddhism, while she was resident in Asia in the 1980s, could show hostility to Christianity.<sup>59</sup> However, after returning to Germany and establishing herself in a Buddhist centre, she wrote two pieces on biblical themes. She also addressed the Eckhart Society, in which she stated, “In the course of talking on the comparison between Christianity and Buddhism and engaging in ecumenical dialogue, I have come to the conclusion that God (or Godhead) and Nibbāna are identical – that they cannot be anything else.”<sup>60</sup>

Not all Buddhists would agree with Buddhadasa or Ayya Khema. I would argue that the concept of monotheism or God remains one of the most challenging areas for Buddhist–Christian dialogue, particularly in Asia, where the legacy of European colonialism is still felt and where Buddhists are quick to conclude that the god worshipped by Christians can be slotted into their own Buddhist cosmology, in which the Buddha is teacher of gods and humans.

### “Unethical” conversion as a source of conflict

Buddhism and Christianity are both missionary religions. In Buddhism, for instance, the gift of the dharma is the greatest gift a person can give. And no Buddhist would deny the right of an individual or even a group to convert from one religion to another. Conversion becomes a source of conflict when Buddhists suspect that Christians are using what are perceived to be unethical methods, namely misrepresenting Buddhism or promising material goods in return for church attendance. During the period of European expansionism, for instance, I have shown that deep mistrust developed on the Buddhist side toward Christian proselytization, partly because it was predicated on a negative construction of Buddhism that was unrecognizable to Buddhists. This did not die with the end of colonialism. At the heart of the contemporary issue is the fear of some Buddhists that the ultimate agenda of Christians, even those who call Buddhists into dialogue, is conversion, and that Christians are still using unethical methods. In Sri Lanka, in May 2004, mistrust of Christians on the issue of conversion was so high that a “Prohibition of Forcible Conversions Bill” was tabled in Parliament by the Jathika Hela Urumaya [JHU – National Heritage Party]. In June 2004, the Minister of Buddha Sasana within the governing party presented another, similar bill.<sup>61</sup> Neither, I believe, has yet passed into law, but the controversy remains alive, and not only in Sri Lanka. It is present in Cambodia, Thailand, and perhaps Myanmar.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have surveyed three historical cameos of Buddhist–Christian encounter, three areas where there is positive contemporary dialogue, and two areas that hold the potential for conflict. As someone who has been involved in Buddhist–Christian encounter for over 30 years, I am convinced that Buddhists and

Christians have much to gain from in-depth dialogue and mutual learning, but am aware that there are still some barriers to this. I would like to finish with words from the pen of Michael Rodrigo, who taught me so much when I was studying Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 1980s:

*Buddhism and Christianity must grow together. This demands a radical self-emptying. The kenosis of the Jesus community today, drawn from Jesus' self-emptying (Philippians 2: 7) must be matched with the selflessness, anattā, of the Buddhist sasana [dispensation] of today, as closely as possible. For unless there is this basic human trait operative in religion and society, there is no truly human.*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth J. Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," in David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (eds.), *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88–117.

<sup>2</sup> In 1907, Sir Aurel Stein discovered manuscripts that had not been touched for almost a thousand years, preserved by the dry climate in a cave in Dunhuang. An International Dunhuang Project now exists: <http://idp.bl.uk>.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Religion of Taoist Christianity* (London: Piatkus, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multi-Cultural History of Their Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001), 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; cited in "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 99.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Fleming, *Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 40–41.

<sup>7</sup> Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China 1578–1724* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57–60; cited in Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 100.

<sup>8</sup> Lai and von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism*, 69–70.

<sup>9</sup> Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 95–98.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 301, 316, 360, cited in Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 100.

<sup>11</sup> Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 299.

<sup>12</sup> Lai and von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism*, 71–72; cited in Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 100.

<sup>13</sup> Notto R. Thelle, "Japanese Religions and Christianity," in John Bowden (ed.), *Christianity: The Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), 630–53, at 652.

<sup>14</sup> Thelle, "Japanese Religions and Christianity." My first cameo has re-presented and expanded material from Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 99–100.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth J. Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Elizabeth J. Harris, "Memory, Experience and the Clash of Cosmologies: The Encounter between British Protestant Missionaries and Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka," *Social Sciences and Mission* 25:3 (2012): 265–303; Elizabeth J. Harris, "The Impact of Colonialism on Theravāda Buddhist–Christian Relations: An Overview," in Hans-Peter Grosshans, Samuel Ngun Ling, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (eds.), *Buddhist and Christian Attitudes to Religious Diversity* (Yangon: Ling's Family Publication, 2017), 183–207; Elizabeth J. Harris, "Buddhist–Christian Relations in Sri Lanka: An Overview," in Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), *Buddhist–Christian Relations in Asia* (St Ottilien: EOS, 2017), 25–53.

<sup>16</sup> Richard F. Young and G.S.B. Senanayaka, *The Carpenter-Heretic: A Collection of Buddhist Stories about Christianity from 18<sup>th</sup> Century Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Karunaratne Sons, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> See Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, for an examination of the work of these civil servants.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, "Memory, Experience and the Clash of Cosmologies," 277.

<sup>21</sup> William Bridgenell, "On Resentment," *The Friend* IV:I (July), 10–12 at 11, 12, quoted in Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 56, and Harris, "Buddhist–Christian Relations in Sri Lanka," 32.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 197, and Harris, "Memory, Experience and the Clash of Cosmologies," 291.

<sup>23</sup> Richard F. Young and G.P.V. Somaratna, *Vain Debates: The Buddhist–Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Institute, Vol. 23 (Vienna: University of Vienna, 1996), 66.

<sup>24</sup> Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750–1800: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 220.

<sup>25</sup> Young and Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, quoted in Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 202–203; Harris, "Memory, Experience and the Clash of Cosmologies," 299; Harris, "Buddhist–Christian Relations in Sri Lanka," 39–40.

- <sup>26</sup> Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 204.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael D. Leigh, *Conflict, Politics and Proselytisation: Methodist Missionaries in Colonial and Postcolonial Upper Burma 1887–1966* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 10, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 103.
- <sup>28</sup> Leigh, *Conflict, Politics and Proselytisation*, 78, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Scholars have only recently discovered U Dhammaloka, an Irish working-class Buddhist monk who was active in Asia in the early 20th century. See *Contemporary Buddhism* 11:2 (2010), a volume devoted to him. See also Leigh, *Conflict, Politics and Proselytisation*, 80. For a survey of the life and thought of Ananda Metteyya, see Elizabeth J. Harris, *What Buddhists Believe* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998).
- <sup>30</sup> Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).
- <sup>31</sup> Leigh, *Conflict, Politics and Proselytisation*, 78–87, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 103.
- <sup>32</sup> H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (London: MacMillan, 1906).
- <sup>33</sup> G.S.B. Senanayaka, *Buddhist–Christian Dialogue: A Controversy*, Quest 107 (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1990), 11.
- <sup>34</sup> Clement Ediriweera, reprinted in Senanayaka, *Buddhist–Christian Dialogue*, 26.
- <sup>35</sup> Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 105.
- <sup>36</sup> Kadowaki wrote *Zen and the Bible* in the 1970s; it was first translated into English for publication in 1980 (Routledge and Kegan Paul). In 2002, Orbis (Maryknoll, N.Y.) republished it. Enomiya Lassalle, in 1974, published *Zen Meditation for Christians*.
- <sup>37</sup> See Elizabeth J. Harris, “Art, Liturgy and the Transformation of Memory: Christian Rapprochement with Buddhism in Post-Independence Sri Lanka,” *Religions of South Asia* 10:1 (2016): 54–82.
- <sup>38</sup> Shizutero Ueda, “Jesus in Contemporary Japanese Zen: With Special Regards to Keiji Nishitani,” in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Gerhard Köberlin, and Joseph Götz (eds.), *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus* (St Ottilien: EOS, 1999), 42–58, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 106–107.
- <sup>39</sup> See Masao Abe, “Kenosis and Emptiness,” in Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1990), 5–25, and Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,” in John B. Cobb, Jr and Christopher Ives (eds.), *The Emptying God: A Buddhist–Jewish–Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 3–65.
- <sup>40</sup> David W. Chappell, “Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World,” *Buddhist–Christian Studies* 25 (2005): 9–14.
- <sup>41</sup> Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 106.
- <sup>42</sup> Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration in Dual Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- <sup>43</sup> Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, William Skudlarek with Mary Grady (trans.) (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 114.
- <sup>44</sup> See <https://www.dimmid.org>.
- <sup>45</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), 133–35.
- <sup>46</sup> SEM was founded in 1995 by Sivaraksa and other Thai intellectuals who wished to offer an ecologically sound alternative to mainstream education that was underpinned by Buddhist principles.
- <sup>47</sup> Harris, *What Buddhists Believe*, 114–19.
- <sup>48</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Comparing Buddhist and Christian Women’s Experiences,” in Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.), *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999), 241–58.
- <sup>49</sup> From notes taken by the author when she attended the Cambodia conference.
- <sup>50</sup> Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist–Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001).
- <sup>51</sup> Peggy Morgan, “Embodiments of Hope in Christianity,” in Elizabeth Harris (ed.), *Hope: A Form of Delusion? Buddhist and Christian Perspectives* (St Ottilien: EOS, 2013), 121–41.
- <sup>52</sup> Leonard Zwilling (ed.), *The Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, s.j.* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010), 44, quoted in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 107.
- <sup>53</sup> See, for instance, his unpublished diary, 4th December 1891 (accessed at the Maha Bodhi Society Headquarters, Colombo), cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 108.
- <sup>54</sup> Ananda Guruge (ed.), *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala* (Colombo: Ministry of Social Affairs, 1991 [1965]), 409.
- <sup>55</sup> Ananda Metteyya, “Propaganda,” *Buddhism* [Rangoon] 2:2 (March 1908): 169–92, at 184, cited in Elizabeth J. Harris, *Ananda Metteyya: The First British Emissary of Buddhism* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998), 25, and Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 108.
- <sup>56</sup> Personal conversation in Sri Lanka in 1997.
- <sup>57</sup> Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Jesus and Christianity in the Life and Work of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu,” in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Gerhard Köberlin, and Josef Götz (eds.), *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus* (St Ottilien: EOS, 2001), 80–103, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 108.
- <sup>58</sup> Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 76, cited in Harris, “Buddhism and the Religious Other,” 109–10.

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth J. Harris, *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection* (London: Epworth, 2010), 61.

<sup>60</sup> Ayya Khema, "Mysticism Is No Mystery," *Eckhart Review* 5 (Spring 1996): 44–57, at 45, cited in Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 110.

<sup>61</sup> Alexandra Owens, "Using Legislation to Protect against Unethical Conversions in Sri Lanka," *Journal*

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*of Law and Religion*, XII (2007): 323–51, cited in Harris, "Buddhism and the Religious Other," 116.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Rodrigo, "Buddhism and Christianity: Towards a Human Future. An Example of Village Dialogue of Life," in Milburga Fernando (ed.), *Fr. Mike and His Thought*, Vol. 2 (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1988), 19–29, at 20.

## Interreligious Harmony amid Conflicting Truth Claims: A Buddhist Perspective

**Asanga Tilakaratne**

The phenomenon of religious pluralism and the resultant need to be in harmony with those who do not make up a part of one's own group are problematic and challenging. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some such problems and challenges faced, in particular, by the Buddhists living in Sri Lanka today, and to highlight philosophical and historical insights that we can derive from the rich tradition of Buddhism that help foster and promote interreligious harmony in a context of multiplicity of religion.

Religious pluralism is very much a fact of our life today. In the context of Sri Lanka, we have had four of the major religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – in this country for a long time. The first two have a history of more than two millennia, and the last two have existed for the last five or six centuries. In the globalized context of the present-day world, religions, like many other things, have been drawn close to one another as never before. This situation necessarily prompts us to think seriously of the problems of co-existence.

Interreligious harmony and co-existence have not been an easy affair for human beings. This may be easily explained through the Buddhist analysis of human nature as being guided predominantly by thirst or *tanha* for money, power, prestige, and the like. When each individual is motivated by these kinds of wants, co-existence can be anything but smooth.

In this context, religions are usually supposed to provide a solution and a way out. History, however, shows that this has not always been the case. For the most part, religions have been culturing and sobering forces. But time and again we have

witnessed in history that instead of being the solution, religions themselves have been the problem. Instead of being pacifying forces, religions have been the cause of conflicts. In Sri Lanka, we have never had any religious conflicts amounting to wars among adherents of religions. This is basically because Buddhism has been quite an accommodating religion. It is a well-known fact that when the Dutch were attacked by the Portuguese, it was Buddhists who protected them. Also, it is well known how Buddhist monks in the 19th century allowed Christian preachers to use the monastic Dharma-sala as their preaching halls. It took some time for the monks to realize that the matter was much more complex! Historically, the much-discussed King Dutugamunu went to war with the Tamil king Elara not because he was bad (in fact, the Mahavamsa author, a Buddhist monk, asserts how righteous Elara was) but because under his rule, Buddhist culture of the country was being destroyed by his men. Buddhists not only here but also in other traditionally Buddhist countries have been peaceful, even to the point of self-destruction. Discussing the Buddhist record in the world, British historian Arnold Toynbee says, "The three Judaic religions have a record of intolerance, hatred, malice, uncharitableness and persecution that is black by comparison with Buddhism's record."<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, as Noel Sheth has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> that Buddhists have not had their share of aggression. But what he did not notice was that Buddhists have been in conflict only with Buddhists and not with other religionists!

In more recent times, the Buddhists (and Hindus and Muslims as well) in this country have been subjected to an aggressive type of conversion by some fundamentalist groups coming from abroad. These groups justify



this behaviour on the basis of freedom to follow a religion of one's choice and freedom of expression. This has been happening not only in this country but also all over the so-called third world, where the majority of the people experience poverty. We need to see how these phenomena affect interreligious harmony and co-existence.

### **Religious Truth Claims**

It is common among religions to claim that each one of them alone has the truth about the world and human existence. A claim of this sort in any religion is, on the one hand, an assertion of its own position and, on the other, a criticism and a rejection of the religions that preceded it. The history of religions makes it clear that a newly arising religion is always a rejection of other religions. For instance, in India, Buddhism arose as a way to freedom from suffering because Prince Siddhartha was not satisfied with the existing religions of the day: Brahmanism and many other forms of Sramanism, such as Jainism, Ajivikism, and the like. In a similar manner, Christianity came into being owing to Jesus' dissatisfaction with Judaism. Islam came as a rejection of both Judaism and Christianity. If any of the religious leaders were satisfied with what they already had, the new religions would not have arisen. Every religion, in this manner, contains truth claims which exclude the rest.

Truth claims advanced by religions usually come as very strong assertions. This is particularly so when these truths are believed to originate from sources considered to be absolutely infallible. For example, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God, the source of truth or the one who is believed to have revealed the truth, is characterized as omniscient, omnipotent, and absolutely good and benevolent. By the very definition, this god is infallible; anything that is said by such a god cannot be wrong, untrue, or bad. By definition, human beings are limited and imperfect, whereas God is unlimited and perfect. This

makes human beings totally incapable of not merely challenging God, but even understanding God. The end result is unconditional surrender of one's own self and acceptance as final of what is religiously given.

In such a situation, one's acceptance of these truths has to be understood not as an epistemological act, but as an emotional act. Once one accepts the possibility of such a transcendental source, it automatically follows that one accepts what that source claims to have said. The acceptance is an act of faith and faith alone. Faith is basically an emotion. No amount of rational arguments would dissuade one from believing in such truths.

### **Absolutism and Relativism in Religion**

Any form of absolutism is a breeding ground for conflict. It is particularly so when it comes to absolute truths in religion. Religion is such a serious absolutism that one puts one's entire existence at its disposal. Very often it is a choice between an eternal hell or an everlasting paradise. One's love for oneself is the strongest and most crucial. The emotional element in it is the single most important aspect. This explains why very often people are ready to sacrifice even their life for this phenomenon.

In the modern world, many factors – such as the spread of scientific knowledge in such areas as anthropology, history, and sociology; physical proximity due to modern technological advances; and flow of information due to advances in information technology and the like – have forced people to rethink their old ideologies and belief systems. The religious response to this challenge posed by modernism is to embrace a form of relativism toward religious truth claims. Under this new way of thinking, it is held that all religions are true; the apparent differences in these religions can be explained with reference to regional and cultural differences. An ancient Indian saying goes, *ekam hi sat – vipra*

*babudha vadanti* (the truth is one; sages describe it many ways). According to that view, the difference is only a matter of language. (Perhaps Indians have been led to concede this due to the multiplicity of religious beliefs which has been an essential aspect of their existence for thousands of years.)

The resultant relativism certainly looks better than absolutism. It is democratic and socialist and tends to accommodate more. However, it poses a serious epistemological problem: How can there be more than one valid truth relevant to a given situation? In fact, if we examine closely the contemporary religious response to the challenge of co-existence, we can see that the apparent relativism is not really the final stage of the process; it is only provisional. The position is, in fact, a reaffirmation of one dominant form of religion by incorporating all the existing forms of religion within it. Let me give an example of this from academic circles. In his acclaimed work *An Interpretation of Religion*,<sup>3</sup> John Hick, a leading philosopher of religion, says that the ultimate goals of all religions can be classified into two: personal representations and impersonal representations of the Transcendental. Such religious ultimates as Ishvara, Yahweh, Allah, and the like are examples of personal representations. Atman/Brahman, Nirvana, Tathata, and the like are impersonal representations. All these phenomena are ultimately representations of the one and only transcendental entity, which he calls “the Real.” Now this Real is what stands above all these religious goals. What this theory amounts to is that all religions are ultimately one and the same, for the reason that all of them refer to the same transcendental entity. According to this theory, all religions are true – not because all religions as they stand are true (relativist position), but because all of them ultimately have the same final point. This is not really a form of relativism; it is a form of absolutism in democratic garb.

The two positions outlined so far, relativism and the new form of absolutism, both seem

to be unsatisfactory and unacceptable for different reasons. The rejection of relativism could sound like a rejection of the goals which those who accepted the relativist position wished to achieve, namely, interreligious co-existence and harmony. Therefore the rejection of relativism needs to be supported carefully. Relativism in religion may not be acceptable by anyone who is serious about religion as a way of life leading to a fixed destination. In holding that religions can be different from one another, we do not need to undermine the vast amount of common factors seen among religions. Religions do have a lot in common. Nevertheless, there seem to be certain differences which are fundamental and basic. The difference between two theistic religious traditions may be of such minor issues as the appropriateness of the names used to call God, the correctness of the epithets used to describe God, and the like. But if we contrast a theistic religion with a non-theistic religion, such as Buddhism, the differences are not nominal. They involve the very fundamental beliefs of the two religions: whereas one is based on the assumption of the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-good God who created the universe, the other begins by rejecting such a possibility. This fundamental difference accounts for the other equally fundamental differences between the path and the goal accepted by each tradition. If such is the situation, relativism cannot be the right position to adopt. There cannot be a doubt about the necessity and validity of religious harmony, but it needs to be situated on a sustainable basis.

The new form of religious absolutism is a kind of colonialism in religion. The underlying assumption of this project is the belief that in order to be acceptable and lovable, “the others” need to be in conformity with one’s own categories. There is a need to reshape and reinterpret “the other” so that it suits our own requirements. The real solution, therefore, cannot be either relativism or absolutism,

however sophisticated or mild. The real solution has to be pluralism based on mutual respect. In a pluralistic religious dimension, one accepts the multiplicity of religions as a fact and acts accordingly.

### **Epistemological and Ethical Challenge**

A real epistemological challenge for this position is to show that a religion can uphold its claim for truth and still practise harmony with other religions, which it believes to be not totally true. In other words, can religions hold on to what they consider to be true and come up with a philosophy enabling oneself to live while also letting others live? The history of religions is full of incidents of destroying other religions for the propagation of one's own. This is no wonder in a situation where one accepts some belief to be true not for rational reasons but for one's emotional attachment to it. We cannot say that things have changed drastically. Today we do not hear religious wars being fought in order to propagate one religion over the rest. Nevertheless, several ongoing conflicts in the world are caused solely by historical religious reasons. Apart from this, many efforts are being made by groups of people to convert others to their own religion by unacceptable means. It is true that people are not being killed for this purpose today. But they are being forced to accept one religion over another by improper means.

Religious fundamentalism is very much a part of today's globalized society. Religious fundamentalists are trying their level best to see that all the other religions are replaced by their own. Established forms of religion, too, are not without their secret agendas for conversion. Religions seem to have a kind of cold war going among them still. Mutual distrust and the desire to see that the other is eliminated are the key characteristics of this way of behaviour. It is ironical to see that most of the aggressive forms of religious conversions are taking place today under the guise of exercising one's freedom of thought, freedom of choice, freedom of expression, and other similar human rights

and liberties. The kinds of freedom spoken of here are not of those who are being converted, but those who are engaged in conversion. The majority of the people who become the victims, not only in this country but also in many other parts of the world, are those who are deprived of economic well-being and are hence powerless to resist any pressure. Ultimately, the question here is this: Whose freedom of choice and expression really matters? The freedom of the converter is being used to undermine the freedom of the converted.

Buddhism as an ethical path of freedom from suffering has never used anything other than rational persuasion for proselytizing. It is one religion in history that has never resorted to the power of weapons or money to propagate itself. Its very naturalist and humanist foundation makes it unlikely to be a breeding ground for fundamentalism. People in Sri Lanka today are the victims of many forms of fundamentalism. Even in rural Buddhist heartlands of this country, people are not left to be in their peacefulness. The situation is not confined to this country alone. Recent incidents in Afghanistan by the Taliban clearly show that the historical tradition of physical destruction of Buddhism is not a thing of the past. It is only a fact that Buddhism is the one that has suffered most in the hands of the other religious organizations. I say this neither to arouse self-pity nor to generate hatred toward others. The purpose is to show that we need to have a correct attitude toward these happenings and toward those who are responsible for such happenings. The answer for us is not a form of Buddhist fundamentalism in order to retaliate. The Buddhist track record has remained intact so far and needs to remain so for the future. The answer for the suffering the Buddhists are undergoing today is to get organized against such actions and be strong to defend themselves without doing harm to the basic principles by which they are to abide.

Adherence to the basic principles and values of Buddhism is of paramount importance

here. The ultimate protection of Buddhism has to come from that. We know that religious fundamentalists are destroying the Buddhist heritage in places like Afghanistan and South Korea. But in our own country, the Buddhist cultural heritage has been systematically destroyed by those who have become slaves to a thirst for wealth (*tanhaa-daasa*). The end result is no different. In a way, what is happening in our own country is much worse, because when an ethical path leaves its proper resting place, namely, human behaviour, it is gone for good. Buddhism has to be equally protected from our internal evil forces, in particular from the forces of a materialist outlook which are sweeping across the Buddhist life of both householders and monks alike.

Globalization has been a mixed bag: economically and culturally, it has brought both good and bad, in particular, to countries like ours. In terms of religion, globalization has made it possible for Buddhism to spread practically all over the world via both open space and cyberspace. In one respect, also, globalization may prove to be salutary. With the vast advances of information technology and transport, the various parts of the world today are much closer to one another than they were a hundred years ago. What this means for religions is that they cannot ignore the existence of others any longer; nor can they expect their public behaviour not to be known by others. In such a situation, all religions must be sensitive to other religions. This forces religions to have a well-articulated position and attitude toward the rest of the religions.

Furthermore, we live in a world where a secular morality, by way of the UN charter for human rights and the like, is being accepted as a universal standard. It remains an open question whether the principles adopted in such charters are acceptable to all. In particular, it has been made clear that these universal documents take for granted much from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The centrality of the very concept of human rights has been questioned from the point

of view of Buddhism. Despite all the limitations, what is significant is the common belief that there must be a set of rules for decent behaviour, acceptable by all human beings in their capacity as human beings. In the form of the five precepts, Buddhism provides such a code of conduct from its very inception. With globalization it has become imperative for religions either to abide by these universal conditions or to come up with an even broader set of principles.

This, in general, means that any particular religious organization cannot overlook the implications of globalization. In accommodating other religions that are not acceptable to one's own standards of truth, a religion has to accept religious pluralism. Indian religion in general and Buddhism in particular provide examples for this form of broadmindedness. The Buddha has made it very clear that the path shown by him is the only path for the attainment of Nirvana, which is to end suffering. Buddhism also makes it clear that theism or any form of determinism or substantialism (*atma-vada*) cannot lead one to this goal. The Buddha talked only of suffering and its cessation. He claimed that his teaching is right and truthful as far as achievement of this goal is concerned. This implies that any other religion could have truthful and acceptable features concerning other aspects of human life. Therefore, in Buddhism there is not a total denial of any religious system; nor is there any exclusive claim for truthfulness. This shows that Buddhism treads a path between absolute truth claims and unconditional relativism. This enabled Buddhism to accept the existence of the other religions. But this (namely, that there can be something good and some truth in any religion) has not been given as a reason for Buddhism's acceptance of the existence of other religions. The Buddhist standpoint derives solely from the belief that human beings have freedom to hold any view. Buddha has always thought that it is his duty to tell the people what he thought was good and to try to convince those who held

wrong views (in the Buddha's opinion) of the wrongness of their views. For this purpose he held discussions with them, argued and debated with them. While it seems that he was often successful, there were instances when he was not. But he kept on engaging in discussions with them. The ground rule was that one has a right to hold one's views.

A religious person has a duty to tell others what he thinks to be true, right, and good. In the context of Sri Lanka today, we Buddhists have to know that this is a fundamental right of those who opt to do it. Hinduism has existed in Sri Lanka for well over two millennia. Christianity and Islam have been in this country for the last five or six centuries – in the case of Islam, possibly longer. They have a right to follow their religion and to educate others about it. While the Buddhists come to accept this, these other religions themselves have to accept the position of Buddhism in the same manner. In this type of mutual acceptance, the best and most wholesome way to exist is to be open and sincere toward other religions without any hidden agenda. In a world where we are moving so closely with each other, there is a need for an ethic for religions themselves. It has to be agreed upon by all religionists. Buddhism has been most tolerant about religions and most decent in ways of proselytizing. Therefore it is fitting that Buddhism should get the same treatment from others. It is a shame in this so-called cultured and civilized age that the Buddhists in Sri Lanka must fight for their freedom to follow the religion of their choice without being harassed or coerced.

### Concluding Remarks

In my view, many challenges lie before all of us who identify with religion in one way or another. Among them, a very serious one will be to evolve a set of ethics by which religions themselves behave toward one another. Buddhists will have to come up with such a code of ethics in accordance with the essence of the teaching of the Buddha. In a world ridden with problems and miseries, there is no need for religions to contribute to the increase of these issues. Religious fundamentalism has caused a lot of suffering for humanity. It is causing suffering for the Buddhists in Sri Lanka today. We need to find solutions to these problems – not by adhering to any fresh form of fundamentalism, but by being vigilant and ethically strong.

In a well-known statement, *sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*,<sup>4</sup> Buddhism has a noble tradition of wishing all beings well. This includes all beings without any discrimination: all those who follow other religions and those who do not follow any religion. This perennial Buddhist wish may well be adopted by all religions as the foundation of their code of behaviour toward one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Noel Sheth in "Buddhism and Communalism," *Religion and Society* 35:4 (December 1988), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Karaniyemetta-sutta (*kbuddakanikaya*).

## The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): A Joint Christian–Buddhist Reflection

**Kemmyo Taira Sato and Michael Ipgrave**

*This study of one of the most famous of Jesus' parables was jointly led by a British Anglican Christian and a Japanese Jōdo Shinsbū Buddhist, whose shared reflections are grounded in a long and deep history of friendship, having co-operated together in Anglo-Japanese ceremonies of remembrance and reconciliation after the Second World War (Pacific War). From this experience, both of us have learned in a new way what it means to become a neighbour to one another, and in this text both of us have come to appreciate more deeply the challenge of being loved by, as well as loving, the other.*

The biblical text: Luke 10:25-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

### The Parable of the Good Samaritan

*25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

*29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take*

*care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

### Where Am I in This Text?

As the lawyer listened to Jesus' parable, he must have wondered where he belonged in the narrative. Although Jesus clearly challenged him at the end to follow the example of the Samaritan, he would surely have begun by placing himself in the role of one of the obviously law-abiding characters. As we read or hear the parable today, we too have to ask ourselves: Where am I?

There are a range of possible answers. Before we come to the Samaritan, we see the priest and the Levite on the road: those who are professionally and publicly religious can all too easily see in their actions a pattern of behaviour we recognize in ourselves. Depending on their situation in life, others might see themselves in the role of the innkeeper – or even the donkey.

Probably most of us, though, would instinctively identify with the wounded traveller lying by the roadside. On the other hand, a Buddhist reading this text immediately saw in the thieves who attacked that man a representation of his own blind passions and attachments; similar interpretations can be found in the Christian tradition also – the thieves stand for our own profound sinfulness, which incapacitates us almost to the point of death. Like the man wounded on the verge, we are unable to save ourselves from this condition. Here is a deep resonance between Christians and Buddhists in the way we understand our human predicament.

## Compassion and Mercy

The Samaritan's action is described in two ways: Jesus says he was “moved with pity” (v. 33), while the lawyer identifies him as one who “showed mercy” (v. 37). These two key words, “pity” (or “compassion”) and “mercy,” naturally belong together, but their roots are quite different. In the Greek text, to be moved by compassion, *splanchnizomai*, derives from the word *splanchnē*, “bowels” or “intestines” – that is to say, it is a feeling from deep within oneself. The Samaritan in this situation is not just feeling sorry for somebody he has met; he is moved in his insidest inside, as he sees the wounded man and identifies at gut level with his condition.

On the other hand, “mercy,” *eleos*, is a practical expression of this feeling directed by the Samaritan to the man to help and to heal him. It consists of concrete actions such as anointing and binding up his wounds, placing the man on his donkey, committing him to the care of the innkeeper, and reimbursing the latter's costs. Early Christian commentators delighted to point out that *eleos*, “mercy,” puns with *elaios*, “oil.” It is with oil that the Samaritan dresses the man's wounds, and oil in Christian worship has always been associated with the ministry of healing, which in turn is seen as a work of mercy. More precisely, it is one of the traditional Seven Acts of Corporal Mercy which Pope Francis, in 2016, reminded Christians were duties for us all.

Compassion and mercy, then, belong together in this story, and belong together for all of us, as emotion of the heart and as act of the body, respectively. It is interesting to reflect on how far this pairing compares with the related ethical principles of *karuna* and *metta* in early Buddhism. It would be unwise to push for too exact a correspondence, but some parallels can perhaps be seen insofar as *karuna* is a spontaneously arising disposition, while *metta* is a deliberately cultivated virtue.

## Jesus the Good Samaritan

The display of compassion and mercy points us also to the answer to another question of narrative identification: not “Who represents me in this story?” but “Whom does the Good Samaritan represent?” In Luke's gospel (and in the Book of Acts which follows it and shares its authorship), “compassion” and “mercy” are only ever directly attributed to God the Father, or to a figure who clearly is intended to represent God (such as the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son), or to Jesus Christ. The most natural reading of this parable, therefore, is to interpret the Good Samaritan as being a figure representing Christ. This is in fact the traditional exegesis of the early Fathers, for whom the Samaritan's crossing of the road symbolizes the descent of the Son to become incarnate as Jesus, the human being who enters fully into our wounded condition to save us. From the time of Origen in the third century onwards, the tradition also maintains that this is the meaning that Jesus himself intended when telling this parable.

It is natural, then, to ask whether there is anything in Jesus' life which might add credibility to a self-identification as a Samaritan. There is no historical evidence that Jesus was himself a Samaritan; he was a Jew, and in John's gospel clearly presents himself as such in opposition to the Samaritans (John 4:22). Later in the same gospel, though, there is an interesting exchange (John 8:48-49) in which his enemies accuse him of “being a Samaritan and having a demon.” Jesus' retort is limited simply to saying that he does not have a demon. In other words, he does not repudiate the insulting accusation that he is a Samaritan; perhaps to this extent, then, we can say that he did not exclude an identification of himself with this despised minority.

## Unexpected Righteousness

It is important to realize the force with which Jesus' introduction of a Samaritan

who acts righteously would have assaulted the presuppositions of the pious lawyer who addressed him. Jewish belief in Jesus' time held that the Samaritans, although they claimed to have the law of Moses, were actually incapable of fulfilling its commandments – they were congenitally incapable of righteous action. By contrast, in his initial answer to Jesus' question, the lawyer shows clearly that he knows what the law requires, and we can assume that he is doing his best to fulfill its requirements.

Jesus does not dispute with him over this. However, he goes on to overturn the lawyer's assumptions by telling the story of somebody who is supposedly incapable of keeping the law who actually fulfills its demands in a far more radical way than he could have anticipated. Righteousness comes from the most unexpected quarter, indeed precisely from where it was thought to be impossible. There is a message here for Christians and Buddhists alike in our attempts to predict or limit where the right will be found. There is also an echo of the startling paradox expressed in Shinran Shōnin's words recorded in the *Tannishō*: "If even the righteous can be saved, how much more the sinner!"

### Justification of the Helpless

The exchange between Jesus and the lawyer touches on some of the deepest points of Christian theology. In a revealing phrase, Luke says that the lawyer wants to "justify himself" (v. 29). Within the immediate context of the passage, this may mean nothing more than that he wishes to prove himself in the right in his altercation with Jesus. However, in Christian understanding, salvation depends on "justification," for it refers to being in a right relationship with God. To say that the lawyer is seeking to justify himself, therefore, at least hints at an effort on his part to find in himself his own capacity to satisfy God's requirements.

In response, Jesus' parable asks him to view the situation of "a certain man" who is helpless, broken, and close to death. The

indeterminacy of this character surely means that the lawyer is invited to put himself in the man's place – as are we. When we do so, we realize that there is nothing the self can do to win a better place; on the contrary, the one who will be justified is the one who knows his own helplessness. In the teaching of Jōdo Shinshū, rebirth into paradise is achieved not by self-power (*jiriki*) but by the power of the other (*tariki*). For Christians, as for Pure Land Buddhists, justification happens through faith in another.

### Becoming a Neighbour

At the end of the parable, Jesus moves the lawyer on from identifying with the man in the road to seeking to follow the example of the Samaritan: "Go and do likewise," he urges him (v. 37). But the one who is invited to do this is a changed personality from the one who querulously asked, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus' words imply, at least to one Buddhist reading them, the need for an existential change of understanding about one's own standpoint, the place from which one views the whole situation. The one who has suffered so much has become the one who finds himself in the embrace of the neighbour's love. Like the man on the road with whom he has identified up to now, the lawyer has to learn the importance not only of his own act of loving, but – still more – the need to be loved by another.

Thus it is the new man, remade and healed, who has experienced love from his neighbour, who is to "go and do likewise." Imitating through grace the behaviour of the Samaritan who has come into his life, he is to "become a neighbour" to each person he meets (v. 36; the Greek *gegonen* indicates a change of state into a relationship of neighbourliness rather than the blander "to be a neighbour"). Martin Luther expresses for Christians the grounding of this transformation of personality in the grace of God which comes to justify us in Jesus: "I will give myself as a Christ to my neighbour, just as Christ offered himself to me."



As the parable is set in an encounter between a Jew and a Samaritan, belonging to different religious groups, it makes clear both that showing neighbourly mercy is not restricted to members of our own faith community and that the call to become a neighbour is not limited to any one faith community. As Christians or as Buddhists, we are all called to act as merciful neighbours to those in distress; doing so is

evidence of the righteousness which comes to us from beyond.

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# Salt and Light

Margaret R. Rose

How does a consultation 3,000 miles away make a difference to a local parish? The sermon which follows is an attempt to address this question and to invite further reflection and action on how local faith groups might deepen their engagement with partners across the divides of religion, politics, and nation-state.

In reality, the sermon which follows is not my own, but rather a reflection on a sermon preached by Anglican Archbishop Stephen Ho in closing the Anglican–Lutheran–Buddhist Consultation held on 16-20 January 2017 in Yangon, Myanmar. His words and wisdom echoed in my ears and heart days after my return to the United States. His homily was an invitation to engage the question of how a gathering of leaders from diverse faiths could make a difference in a context back in an American parish of the Episcopal Church half a world away.

I was scheduled to preach on the Sunday of my return at the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City, where I serve as priest associate. It is a large church, prominently overlooking 5th Avenue and Central Park. Its mission, from its founding out of the ashes of the American Civil War in 1865, has been a search for reconciliation among people and in the city. As I prayed about what message to offer the faithful at Heavenly Rest, it was not my words but the Archbishop's which came. I offer them here.

*Epiphany 7A*

*Matthew 5:38-48 – Church of the Heavenly Rest, Manhattan, New York, 5 February 2017*

## Love Salt Light

There were about 60 of us, lay leaders, students, bishops, priests, pastors, Buddhist monks. We had come to Myanmar, formerly Burma, for a Consultation on Buddhist–Christian relations. Most of us were from Asia, but also England, Switzerland, Finland, Africa. I was the lone American. We had been together for a week, hosted by the archbishop and the provincial headquarters of the Anglican Church in Myanmar. We listened to Buddhist monks speak of their faith, of the *Dhamma*, of light and peace. We heard about the violence in some parts of the country, notably related to Muslim desires for citizenship. We learned of the new freedoms since the overthrow of the military regime some six years before, heard of progress in sustainable agriculture and health care. We saw poverty, learned of starvations, were told of continued hardships for religious minorities, including Christians. We shared worship, prayers, Eucharist for some, and even a common Bible study.

The conferees visited the Shwedagon Pagoda at sunset and spent a day in study and meditation with students at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University. Conference lecturers shared stories of controversy: a group building a pagoda overnight, occupying Anglican land, later resolving the conflict peacefully between peoples of faith. By the end of a full week, it was time to evaluate, write up next steps, pack, and hear the closing words from the archbishop, Stephen Ho.

He began his reflection by quoting the gospel, which happens to be our scripture text from Matthew 5 for today. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” We were a bit surprised at his choice of text. We leaned closer. Archbishop Stephen continued with words something like this: For too long, we in our church have not let our light shine. We have been too afraid. We have covered ourselves with a big basket of inferiority complex. Stayed within our own walls in an attempt to stay safe. This consultation has helped us overcome our fear, claim our humanity and the value of our faith. Here in Myanmar, although we Buddhists and Christians have lived together for many years, side by side, we do not speak of faith together. This was the first time Christian leaders have visited and, more importantly, prayed together at the Buddhist Theological University. This is the first time we have stood as equals in a land where another religion is by far the most powerful majority. I am grateful that you have been here to help us take the basket off our light. This is a step in claiming our equal humanity alongside all others and acting in BOLD HUMILITY.

These were not words I expected from an archbishop; I am accustomed to hearing more directive and authoritarian speech. But his words were more powerful than any authoritarian piety. Rather, they were full of longing and a desire for a better world; humble and indeed bold. “Thank you,” he said, “for this time together, and thank you most of all for showing up! For coming alongside us, for standing with us as we claim our humanity, as we create a country where all – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and free thinkers – can live in peace. Your presence here is a starting point.”

I believe his wise words were an invitation to us all, noting that each of us learns to know ourselves, to claim our own identity in the faith as we open up to the other. Our diversity makes us confident to act with bold humility. Our dialogue is a step along

the way to building a new culture that is resistant to violence. Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. Coming together in all our diverse faiths helps us to believe it. And Archbishop Stephen gave a charge to each of us to walk in the path of light and share it with each other.

For Buddhists, he said: “Make the Dhamma your light and shine with us. As we recover the confidence of the Church, we can share with and learn from others. Here, we join hands with all human beings, walking together to alleviate the suffering that all of us face.”

I boarded the plane for home the next day feeling that simply showing up had indeed made a difference. Human solidarity and the strength of common and diverse faiths could make the world a peaceful and more loving and just place.

Yet by the time I arrived home to New York and to the current American political crisis, I was not so sure. Of what relevance does a faraway consultation on Buddhism and Christianity have to our lives, to our American struggles and situation? Yes, we are in a divisive historic time in the US, but that is thousands of miles from Myanmar. How can showing up there matter here in New York? What difference does it make here in a country filled with our very different divisions? All that talk about light and being the salt of the earth: what can it mean for us in our parish and in our context? Does Archbishop Ho’s invitation to take the bushel basket off the light call to the church here? How does “showing up” matter close to home?

It was in this struggle to find meaning that I remembered a recent talk by Tony Hillery. Tony is in charge of a gardening project in Harlem, New York. It isn’t far from the church in miles, but is very far in terms of wealth. Harlem Grown, as the project is called, engages schoolchildren and young adults, who might never have seen a farm, in growing and cooking good and healthy food. Tony explained that he was not at our

well-heeled church to raise money, even though there is always great need of that! “What I need right now is YOU,” he said. “We need you and so many more to SHOW UP.” The Archbishop’s words echoed in my mind as I recalled Tony saying, “We need you to show up, to come and work alongside these young folks who are learning to claim their lives, who have so much future ahead of them.” In our gospel language, “Come alongside these young people who are learning to let their own lights shine, learning to be salty and savvy so their lives and the lives of those they love will be better, to claim the ABUNDANT lives that God has promised.”

Archbishop Stephen’s words began to make sense in my own context. I realized that showing up alongside others helps each of us be salt and light as well. The thousands of miles away began to hit close to home.

There are so many ways we can show up in our own contexts. Share the light that is our own... so that others may see and claim it. BE LIGHT and uncover light! The bushel basket begins to come off wherever we ourselves are burdened.

The call of the gospel is certainly to each of us – but it is as well an invitation to stand and work in solidarity with those who have been oppressed, whose light has been or is being darkened or extinguished. To find ways for all of us to ACT in bold humility, as Archbishop Stephen said. The thousands of miles away are hitting close to home!

Let your light shine. Be the salt of the earth. In the seeming chaos in the United States since the election, I found myself wanting to stand alongside those whose lives were being upended by the recent presidential executive orders. I signed a few petitions. I put a letter in the mail to the president. I went to a rally. But it was not until last Friday when I joined in Friday prayers with Muslims (and Jews and Christians, I might add), our bodies kneeling in common to pray, that I thought perhaps our presence mattered. Perhaps “standing alongside,”

“showing up,” gives hope and confidence to those whose light here in America might be dimmed.

There was a rally last week in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty: her torch, or might I say her LIGHT, held high! A journalist from the *Wall Street Journal* described the gathering<sup>1</sup>: “The crowd was unlike what you’d expect to see in a demonstration opposing a ... president’s policies.” The slogans were LOVE slogans. The banners heralded LOVE OF stranger. Another sign was an invitation: “O Come Ye Faithful.” All spoke of our country as a nation of immigrants. “The thousands of men, women and children weren’t, by and large, professional protesters.” They were Americans who SHOWED UP because they felt the values of welcoming the stranger were being violated. And they stood in WITNESS beside the Torch ... the LIGHT of Lady Liberty.

There are all sorts of way of showing up, of sharing your own light so that others might shine. And there will no doubt be many times we need others to show up for us – as individuals and as community. We will need others to be Salt and Light so that we may shine. But as Archbishop Stephen said, this is not our own light, but the light of the gospel. The light of faith which sends us forth into the world.

For indeed: “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Bari Weiss, “A Trump Protest under Lady Liberty’s Gaze.” WSJ Opinion. *Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-trump-protest-under-lady-libertys-gaze-1485821234>.

# Toward 2021: Where and What Do We Want to Be? Envisioning and Strategizing Directions for the Work of the Interreligious Dialogue Team

Peniel Rajkumar

## Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation at the WCC: A Continuing Adventure

It is significant that the word “adventure” was used to describe the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) engagement in dialogue when the WCC’s sub-unit on Dialogue with [People] of Living Faiths and Ideologies was created at the central committee meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971. Forty-seven years later, the sense of adventure continues. As we look toward celebrating 50 years of the setting up of the WCC’s Office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in 2021, this paper is presented to the WCC’s Reference Group on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation as a discussion starter for the journey ahead.

## Of Roots and Wings

As I was collecting some thoughts on envisioning the future direction of the work of the interreligious team, I was reminded of a Sudanese proverb which says, “We desire to bequeath two things to our children: the first one is roots, the other one is wings.” One of the benefits of working for the WCC is to be bequeathed with the gift of roots and wings. The programme on interreligious dialogue had strong roots – both historical and theological. The last 47 years provide definite and definitive foundations to further build upon. At the same time, the freedom that the organization provides gives us the wings to imagine fresh and faithful ways of Christian presence and participation in a pluralistic world in creative fidelity to the gospel of Christ. It is these gifts of roots and wings that I believe will help us move forward even in directions where there is no path yet. After all, as is often the case, “the path

is made by walking.” In what follows I will outline a few areas of work for the future,

## I. Interreligious Competency Drive in a World that Is Flat

I dream of a WCC where each member church would be interreligiously competent. This would be possible through an interreligious literacy drive. Interreligious literacy will empower churches to possess, in the words of Diane Moore of the Harvard Divinity School,

*A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts.*

*The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.<sup>1</sup>*

But how is this possible?

## A flattened interreligious literacy?

In his insightful book *The World is Flat*,<sup>2</sup> Thomas Friedman talks of a world rendered flat – among other things, by the convergence of the flat screens of a personal computer with the effects of globalization. In such a world, the Internet democratizes opportunity for learning and unlearning. One way in which interreligious literacy can be promoted both within and beyond the WCC membership is through the developing and running of online interreligious literacy courses. Personal conversations with people from different theological institutions have confirmed that there is significant interest in developing and offering such a course in partnership with

the WCC. It is a matter of great joy and opportunity for us that our deputy general secretary, Prof Ioan Sauca, who is responsible for the interreligious dialogue and cooperation work of the WCC, is also the director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. Probably this will be something that Bossey could collaborate in – through various aspects of the work that the institute and its faculty carry out in terms of the education and ecumenical formation work of the WCC?

Interfaith literacy goes a long way in dispelling prejudice and preventing conflicts. When I was preparing for my interview for this position with the WCC, Christopher Duraisingh, former director of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, reminded me that "interfaith cooperation is not an emergency room service; it is not a quick fix; rather, it is a public health programme where through prophylactic medicine and vaccines a whole culture of tolerance and resistance to violence is built up." Interfaith literacy goes a long way in preventing conflicts and in enhancing one's preparedness to encounter the other positively.

### **Interreligious audit for interreligious competency**

The ultimate dream would not be just to promote interreligious literacy, but interreligious competency, whereby churches are empowered to, as Diane Moore says, "discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses."<sup>3</sup> Building interreligious competency for the WCC churches in all their diversity cannot be an easy task, because we are not talking of a one-size-fits-all approach: rather, we seek to discern the one size that matters to a particular member church. For us to discern the needs of the church and make the interreligious work of the WCC a responsible and "response-able" endeavour relevant to the needs of the churches, it may be important to engage in an interreligious audit of our member churches, identifying

issues, assessing resources, and addressing needs. The harvest of this interreligious audit can be used to shape the future work of the interreligious dialogue and cooperation team and bridge any existing gaps between the work carried out in Geneva and the needs of our churches.

### **Developing YATRA worldwide**

One of the pieces of work that gives me the greatest joy in the WCC is an interreligious summer school that I developed primarily for young ecumenical leaders in Asia. Following the Busan Assembly in 2013, I initiated a course called YATRA (Youth in Asia Training for Religious Amity) which equips ecumenical leaders in ministries of justice and peace from an interfaith perspective. The word *yatra*, which means "pilgrimage" in various Indic religious traditions, was chosen to resonate with the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. We have successfully run three versions of this course. I increasingly receive queries and requests about whether such a course can be tailored for the African or Latin American context, where there is little knowledge within churches about Eastern religions that have begun to pitch tents in their midst. I see a stage where the Youth in AFRICA Training for Religious Amity or the Youth in the AMERICAS Training for Religious Amity or the Youth in AUSTRALIA Training for Religious Amity can be concrete possibilities one day.

## **II. Bilateral Relations**

### **Expanding the ambit**

The WCC has been engaged in bilateral dialogues with practitioners of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. However, considering the WCC constituency especially in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan, it is clear that interfaith engagement for our member churches in these countries would entail engaging with religions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Shintoism, and folk religions such as Yiguandao in Taiwan. This

was confirmed to me during my recent visit to Singapore and Taiwan as part of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID)'s delegation for a Christian–Daoist dialogue and my visit to the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan. My vision is that over the next three years, at least three bilateral relationships will be initiated through our local member churches and in collaboration with other partners, like the PCID, so the WCC addresses the interreligious realities of our member churches. Also, in the area of developing bilateral and multilateral dialogues, it would be important to “foster interreligious dialogue ecumenically” (to use a phrase borrowed from Monsignor Indunil Kodithawaku Kankanmagale, under secretary of the PCID). In this way ecumenism can be a tool for interreligious dialogue.

### **Where diaspora meets dialogue: Engaging the world dimension of major religions**

One of the telling characteristics of Christianity in the 21st century has been the Christian world's shift in centre of gravity to the global South. Scholars have spoken about the “browning” of Christianity. In a similar vein, one can probably also point to the globalization of Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Today they are no longer Eastern religions but world religions. I see several areas of learning from this phenomenon:

- It is important, perhaps inevitable, for the future that the WCC engages with interreligious questions relevant to migrants from home countries and converts in host countries.
- It will also be important to develop an intersectional methodology for dialogue – giving due consideration to the interaction between the intercultural and interreligious dimensions in diaspora contexts: for example, engaging Sikh Canadians, Korean Muslims, Hindu Germans, and Buddhist Brits.

### **Dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies: The missing piece**

When it was first started, the sub-unit on dialogue included dialogue with people of ideologies. Though the ideology referred to at that time was Marxism and had to be dropped, now is probably the moment to rethink whether dialogue with major ideologies of our time needs to be taken up. I find it difficult to imagine a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace that does not enter into conversation with ideologies like anarchism or socialism.

### **III. From Common Word to Uncommon Action**

#### **Fostering interreligious imagination and action from the bottom up**

Prof Sathianathan Clare, in his lecture “Competing Religious Fundamentalisms” at the event to commemorate 51 years of *Nostra Aetate*, talked about the need for interfaith engagement to have an element of uncommon action. Apart from translating its bilateral dialogues into avenues for appropriate collaborative action, the WCC, in its convening role, must also explore possibilities of fostering imaginative thinking among member churches to engage in uncommon action alongside another religious tradition. One way of doing this would be to have one annual project of uncommon action where the WCC will work with a member church on an interfaith project that is imaginatively and jointly conceived by the member church and an interreligious partner, centred on one question of uncommon good. In this way the interreligious dialogue work of the WCC would be shaped from the bottom up, from the grassroots, with our member churches actively participating.

#### **Thinking with our feet: Reshaping the process of dialogue**

The noted German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his latest book, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, speaks on the need for our imagination to be both realistic and

futuristic. According to Moltmann, “If one is a realist, one must reach out with the power of one’s imagination to the limits of what is possible if we wish to exhaust its potentialities .... On the other hand, the visions lose themselves in irrelevant dreams unless they have their feet in present-day life.”<sup>4</sup> Interreligious thinking today needs to have its feet in present-day life and to address issues which few dare raise. For us to be realistic, it is important that we be aware of the absences around the dialogue tables and get the voices and visions of those who usually do not find places at such tables – such as victims of violence and those rendered vulnerable by patriarchy, xenophobia, and casteism. To be futuristic, our interreligious dialogue needs to be truly intergenerational. I dream of a day when women and youth will outnumber men at dialogue tables. We need to invest in our youth: this is probably a time in our history where we will not just be, as Robert Louis Stevenson has said, “judged by the harvest we reap but by the seeds that we plant.”

#### **Bil-ART-eral dialogue**

What hasn’t happened much within the WCC’s work on interreligious dialogue is an engagement with aesthetics. However, history shows that art has a way of bringing people and ideas of different faiths together in a unique and effective manner. Some of the best expressions of interreligious and indigenous theologies have been through art form, such as in paintings, art, or poetry. In many ways, art offers avenues for the dialogue of spiritual experience. Art succeeds where words fail, and in many ways has the capacity to democratize dialogue, breaking barriers of age, language, religion, and region. I also envisage a way of dialogical engagement using art. Ideally, “bil-ART-eral dialogue” can go a long way in the prevention of violence, the healing of memories, and reconciliation work in areas of conflict. In particular, I want to pay attention to the art forms of the marginalized as important sources for bil-ART-eral dialogue. I think it is high time for us to consider theo-graphia as authentic

interreligious theology and to work on developing it as a tool for democratizing dialogue.

#### **IV. Theological Work: On Not Putting the Horse before the Cart**

The WCC has a reputation of being at the forefront of theological work in the area of interreligious dialogue. We at the Office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation are convinced that it is important that this theological legacy be sustained and carried forward in exciting ways. In doing our theological work, we make sure that our projects do not fall into the trap of what Indian Dalit theologian A.P. Nirmal terms “putting the horse before the cart” – that is, developing the theological/theoretical in isolation from the experiential. Therefore, our theological projects are built on the cornerstone of the experience of our churches – the body of Christ. Let me mention in particular the theological work done on Christian self-understanding and the work on multiple religious belonging. It is heartening that our theological projects have caught the imagination of the wider academic audience. For example, when the book *Many Yet One: Multiple Religious Belonging* was launched at the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta last year, we ran out of copies. We are currently on the third printing. This is because the WCC, in a unique way, has the capacity to engage themes of significant academic interest from pastoral and practical perspectives. It is my hope that the work on multiple religious belonging will be brought together in a booklet which will anticipate the need of the churches ahead of its time and provide a tool to engage with the issue.

#### **Toward an interreligious theology of liberation**

One of the other projects planned for next year focuses on developing an interreligious theology of liberation. The theological momentum initiated by 20th-century liberation theologies had an unprecedented effect in helping churches engage with the



theme of social transformation. The impact of liberation theologies has also extended to other religious traditions, to the extent that we have Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim theologies of liberation. One of the missing links for liberation theologies has been the interreligious dimension. A theological project which will seek to discern the shape of a theology where peace and justice will kiss each other through the intersection of interreligious and liberationist concerns is a need of the hour.

### **Toward 2021: 50 years of dialogue**

The year 2021 marks 50 years since the creation of the WCC's programme on interreligious dialogue and cooperation. It is important that this event be marked by something significant. It may be an appropriate time for a major interfaith event which engages with the tension between mission and dialogue. This theme will also help us to engage with the document *Christian Witness in a Multi Religious World*, which was jointly produced by the WCC, the PCID, and the World Evangelical Alliance. It is significant that 2021 will also be the 10th anniversary of the publication of the *Christian Witness* document. I see this as an opportunity to collaborate ecumenically with the PCID.

### **Joint projects with the PCID**

The fruitful relationship that the WCC enjoys with the PCID is both a sign of strength and a symbol of mutual support. I envisage that in the coming three years, our friendships will be deepened and our partnership further strengthened. I see the tradition of collaboration on joint theological as well as practical projects being taken forward in a complementary manner. A booklet on *Education for Peace* and joint work on new religious movements are just a few of the exciting possibilities that lie ahead for us to bring to fruition.

I am also thinking about whether, as a concrete public sign of our work together, these organizations can collaborate on an annual interfaith lecture by a prominent religious leader/scholar on a pertinent theme, to be offered both in Geneva and in Rome (during UN Interfaith Week or any other appropriate time.) This could also be an annual high-profile dialogue/debate between two personalities who have been involved in ground-breaking work in religious/interreligious dialogue.

### **(In)Conclusion**

The above-mentioned points are just a few ideas to foreground our thinking on future directions for the WCC's interreligious work. They are provided here not as a definitive roadmap for the future, but more as a starting point for discussion and discernment. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu reminds us, "The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." In many ways, therefore, these thoughts offer that first step into the future – a future that must be walked in humility, with hope, and for the healing and wholeness of the *oikos*.

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<sup>1</sup> Diane L. Moore, 2015: *Our Method* [Religious Literacy Project, Harvard Divinity School], 4, [https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/files/hds-rlp/files/our\\_method\\_1.pdf](https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/files/hds-rlp/files/our_method_1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Moore, 2015: *Our Method*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015).





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