

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Looking Back, Looking Ahead, and Listening Ever More Deeply

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I was asked to give a brief overview of the subject of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, looking back over its history and looking ahead to its future. I begin with two caveats. First, of necessity, this account will be very general and I will paint with a very broad brush. I cannot speak to the many variations and exceptions to many, if not all, of the general statements that I make. Second, inevitably, this account will also be very subjective. It will especially be colored by my visits in recent years to Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Taiwan.

THE DIALOGUE ON RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Looking back over the history of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, one notices a pattern that is regularly remarked upon: Christians show a lot more interest in dialogue with Buddhists than Buddhists show in dialogue with Christians. This is especially the case with respect to dialogue regarding each other's religious thought.¹ Sometimes Christians observe this fact with dismay, or with the implication that there is something wrong with the Buddhist side because of this lack of interest. There is a sense among some Christians that Buddhists *should* be more interested in learning from Christianity on the level of religious thought. I would like to address this idea that Buddhists *should* be more interested in learning from Christianity on the level of religious thought.

First, several people have noted that the place and function of religious thought in Buddhism are rather different than their place and function in Christianity. For example, as Rita Gross has pointed out, some forms of Buddhist meditation have no reference to Buddhist thought at all—especially some Theravada practices such as mindfulness and choiceless awareness—whereas neither she (at least, at that time) nor I can think of any Christian meditation that doesn't reference God or Jesus.²

Again, Rita Gross has stated that for Christians to take at least some Buddhist thoughts and practices seriously, they needn't give up necessarily any of their own fundamental doctrinal commitments, whereas the reverse is not the case.³ That is, a

Buddhist who wanted to take Christian thought seriously would almost immediately come face-to-face with Christianity's theism. They likely would be unable to proceed, since accepting theism would require them to forego the whole edifice of Buddhist thought.

Here I must demur. It is true that Christianity's theism and Buddhism's non-theism give fundamentally different foundations to their respective worldviews. But surely there are some elements of Christian thought and practice that Buddhists could absorb from Christianity without a fundamental reorientation. Some examples of ideas in Christianity that seem unthreatening to the foundations of Buddhism, yet potentially growth-inspiring for Buddhism in dialogue, come readily to mind. For example, as the relative place of laypeople shifts within modernizing Buddhism, a great deal might be learned from Christian thought on church and community. Again, Christian thought that contemplates realization of the Kingdom of God here and now might be of interest to those Taiwanese Buddhists who speak of a "Pure Land on Earth." Even in the (semi-)ontological area, Christian thought on Spirit or pneuma might make for a potentially enriching dialogical partner for Buddhists, with their ideas on Buddha nature, Tathagatagarbha and Dharmakaya. The two sets of thinking on Natural Law could be a place of mutual learning. And many of the parables of Jesus have the power to cause people to see things in a new way, regardless of worldview. There is much that Buddhists could absorb from Christians while maintaining their basic worldview. Yet it remains true that it is hard to see much evidence of Buddhists absorbing anything substantial from Christian religious thought.

I think that at this point in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, we can say that the Buddhists have voted with their feet. Buddhist dialoguers are not ignorant of Christian religious thought. There have been some rather deep Buddhist studies, for example, of Jesus and of Christian mystics.⁴ However, it seems clear that they haven't, as a rule, found anything there that has compelled them to add to Buddhism something from Christian thought. Buddhists have voted with their feet and walked away from Christian theology, without taking much of any of it home as a souvenir. The situation reminds me of a recent American film titled *He's Just Not That into You*; here, the situation is addressed to the Christians: "Buddhists Just Aren't That into Your Theology." If Christians insist that they *should* be, are they perhaps not hearing a message that the Buddhists are giving them as part of the dialogue?

Rather than expecting, then, that the other side "should" find something useful in some aspect of one's religion, it might be helpful to think instead in terms of needs. I think we can see in the overall pattern of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue that members of each religion have been voting with their feet. Not all messages are transmitted with words. I think we can say at this point in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue that some results are in. What each religion has taken from the other is something that they have found useful. They have left alone or walked away from what they have not found useful—for them, in their own particular historical and cultural situatedness.

The Christian side, among other things, has found quite useful Buddhist religious thought or Dharma teachings. Prime examples of this are books by John Keenan,

such as his *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology*, and Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha, I Could Not Be a Christian*.⁵ In his work, Keenan consciously names and puts aside the Hellenic philosophy through which Christianity has traditionally been expressed as something that just doesn't work anymore for many people. Yet one needs to frame one's thought and speak in some way. So Keenan has experimentally expressed Christian thought using Buddhist concepts and terminology, finding these concepts, and indeed the entire conceptual stance of Mahayana Buddhism, much more useful. In Paul Knitter's case, he focuses his conceptual struggles upon traditional Christian theology, formulated in Latin and ultimately rooted in Greek philosophy.⁶ With disarming openness, he first recounts his difficulties with traditional Christian theological ideas, then his "passing over" to Buddhism, where he recounts finding ideas that do work for him, serving as what he calls "a guide and a light,"⁷ and finally his "passing back," where, using that light, he is able to "rediscover," "retrieve," and "recreate" Christian tradition.⁸ These are two of the more dramatic examples, but there are many, many cases of Christians finding things of value in Buddhist thought.

In another area, and as is well known, Western Christians have voted with their feet also in embracing Buddhist meditation, particularly those Buddhist meditations that are light on specifically Buddhist elements such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, Tantric deities, Buddha lands, and so on. Buddhist meditations devoted to the cultivation of such things as mindfulness, concentration, and loving-kindness have been taken up by countless Christians, as well as many Jews (notably in the Jewish Renewal movement) and secular Western people (in mindfulness-based stress reduction and the whole field of counseling and psychological therapy). The role of Buddhist meditation in helping to inspire the revival of interest in Christian meditation practices, such as the Jesus Prayer, is also substantial.

WHAT BUDDHISTS HAVE LEARNED FROM THE DIALOGUE AND WANT FROM THE DIALOGUE

As mentioned above, there have been no important works by Buddhists that somehow incorporate Christian religious thought into Buddhist religious thought. Much less is there anything comparable to the works of Keenan and Knitter, which fundamentally rethink the religious thought of their own traditions by using the ideas of the other tradition. The closest thing from the Buddhist side might be appreciations of Jesus, notably those written by the Dalai Lama (*The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*) and Thich Nhat Hanh (*Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*).⁹ However, though these works do express appreciation of the person of Jesus and his teachings, they are in no way comparable to the works by Keenan and Knitter. In fact, they are the opposite insofar as they view Christ and his teachings very much through a Buddhist lens, perceiving Jesus as a bodhisattva or as embodying Buddhist values.

However, if we ask how the Buddhist side has voted with their feet, we quickly see that they also have absorbed transformative learning from their partner in the dialogue. Before discussing this, though, it is important for us to recall the situat-

edness of Asian Buddhists, which is hugely influential in the Buddhist response to Christianity: Asia is globalizing, Westernizing, and modernizing, and a great deal of it is postcolonial. The world is shrinking; our interconnectedness is more and more pronounced every day; ideas, products, labor, capital, disease, pollution, and everything else flow rapidly in every direction. But these things have different meanings in different parts of the world. In Asia, Western culture and civilization seem to be an endless, unstemmable, irresistible flood. In many respects, they have already “won.” The traditional Asian ways of life continue mainly in the countryside, an ever-shrinking portion of the overall culture. The future is in the ever-expanding cities, where students learn fluent English and a rational way of thinking. Religions, including Buddhism, must adapt to the times or become ever more irrelevant to the younger generation and the urban, educated middle class.¹⁰

Buddhism overall is well into the process of adjusting to the conditions of modernity, though this process is much further along in some places than in others. Where Buddhism is not very modernized, there may be an awareness of a decline in the strength and influence of Buddhism, yielding a feeling of fragility, or perhaps of defensiveness about Buddhism’s future prospects. Where the process of modernization is well advanced, such as in Taiwan, there may be a sense of pride in the rediscovered value of Buddhism and a touch of defiance of the West and its Christianity. (Taiwanese Chan master Venerable Sheng Yen was fond of saying, “When people maintain what they believe in is the best religion in the world, they should not forget that others also have the right to say that their faith is the best.”¹¹)

In addition, let us not forget that the twentieth century was devastating for Asian Buddhism. In some cases, political events wreaked devastation upon Buddhism—such as in the People’s Republic of China, Tibet, and Cambodia—or resulted in government controls of varying severity—such as in Laos and Vietnam. In China and Cambodia, Buddhism is literally rebuilding from the rubble. In the other cases, governmental control has seriously reduced Buddhism’s flexibility and ability to be creative.

We must add to this picture of the Asian context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue the ongoing resentment of Christianity felt to this day in much of Asia over its linkage with past Western powers’ colonizing of their countries. As is well known, those colonizers brought heavy-handed Christian missionaries along with them in such a way that Western colonial power and Christianity were inseparable in the minds of the Asians who were on the receiving end of those Western presences. These things are not forgotten.¹² As I traveled in Taiwan in the fall of 2012, the Buddhist nuns who were my primary hosts could not have been more kind, gentle, gracious, and eager to hear what I had to say about engaged Buddhism. But I could not say a positive word about Christianity without someone saying, “All they want to do is convert you!” As I prepared this paper, I was often moved to think: Given this history, what would it take to make Asian Buddhists really want to listen to Christians? I think it’s a really important question, and one not easy to answer.

To begin now to name what Buddhists have absorbed from Christianity, they *have* embraced and adopted the example of Christian charitable work. A well-documented

example of this kind of direct influence upon Buddhism can be seen in the story of the origins of Tzu Chi (Buddhist Compassion Relief), one of the great manifestations of the contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist renaissance, founded by the Buddhist nun Master Cheng Yen. The story is told that Venerable Cheng Yen saw a “pool of blood” on the floor of a hospital in Taiwan and was told that it was from an aborigine woman who was miscarrying but turned away from the hospital since she could not pay for medical services. Shortly after that, as a Tzu Chi spokesperson tells it, “three Catholic nuns came to our hut to pay our Master a visit. . . . There was a long discussion. The Catholic nuns mentioned that there are all sort of Catholic hospitals and schools and charity organizations, but never any Buddhist ones. They told the Master that in the eyes of the world, the Buddhists are but a passive group of people contributing nothing to society.”¹³ Master Cheng Yen herself commented, “While other religions such as Christianity and Catholicism have acted to improve public welfare, I felt ashamed about being a nun who could not implement the Buddhist teachings of compassion and wisdom in society.”¹⁴ From the combination of her Buddhist faith and the Christian example and challenge, Venerable Cheng Yen developed the massive program of Tzu Chi charitable, environmental, cultural, and emergency-relief works. Tzu Chi is the largest charity in the Buddhist world and the largest NGO in the Chinese-speaking world. This is partially an outcome of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. And of course Tzu Chi is by no means alone in being inspired by the example of Christian charitable works.

Simply put, Buddhists have found it beneficial to talk with Christians and observe Christian actions in the area of social engagement. *This* is the kind of thing they want to focus on. This is how they have voted with their feet. In this vein, Venerable Sheng Yen said to an interreligious dialogue, “my first proposition is to urge everyone to focus not so much on the discussion of one’s own religious background, of one’s own religious doctrine, of the similarities and differences between different religious faiths, but to focus more on the shared needs of humankind as a whole.”¹⁵

It is also worth mentioning that Buddhists have been influenced by and sometimes adopted some Christian institutional ideas. This is part of the modernization process and very important for Buddhism’s future viability. As Asia becomes more urban and more modern, Buddhism must adapt and develop new institutions. Some of these are inspired directly by Christianity. Thus in Sri Lanka, during the time of the British colonial presence, a group of young men including Anagarika Dharmapala developed the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), based upon the model of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA); this institution then spread from Sri Lanka to other Buddhist countries. Dharmapala actually developed the YMBA as part of his effort to combat the encroachment of Christianity on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, but he still borrowed the idea from the Christians. Another, less combative, example has to do with rethinking the Buddhist education of laypeople. Lay education traditionally has not been Buddhism’s strong suit, and certainly the old way of education based upon the village temple no longer applies in urbanized settings. As an example of new institutions, one finds in Taiwan formalized and very systematic educational programs for laypeople, including children, using a host of

graduated, age-appropriate textbooks and materials. I can't say how direct the influence has been here, but the programs have a lot in common with Christian Sunday schools and adult education programs, in a Buddhist form—the lessons for children incorporate Buddhist history and doctrine, meditation instruction, and the practice of giving charitable service.

LOOKING FORWARD

As I contemplated the future of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, I was moved by the words of Sri Lankan (Christian) bishop Kenneth Fernando. He spoke of the debate over the past several decades regarding the relative merits of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, naming the very weighty theorists who had engaged in these debates, such as Karl Barth, Hans Kung, and John Hick. He then went on to say, "It is my contention that all these are attempts to build up a grand theory that covers all religions from a Christian perspective and is therefore triumphalistic. It is still a form of Christian imperialism, which inhibits and is an obstacle to building up true inter-faith relations. In our multi-faith world we have to resent all tendencies to be judgemental and become the dominant partner. If we really need a model in which all religions can have a place we must work out such a model in dialogue with people of other faiths."¹⁶ I was struck by these words not because I necessarily agree with them—I have engaged in some constructing of dialogue theory myself—but because I find them helpful. In them I hear a voice from the non-Western world that suggests to me a way forward on the question I mentioned earlier that kept haunting me as I was writing this paper. To restate it, the question that I kept asking myself was this: What would it take to overcome the legacy of Christianity in Asia, where to many if not most people, as soon as you say the word "Christian," the first thing they think of—justified or not—is aggressive Christian missionary work caring only to maximize conversions while playing handmaiden to Western power and empire and looking down upon local culture?

It is both important and disconcerting to note that Fernando draws no distinctions in his statement between an exclusivist like Karl Barth and committed dialogue promoters and pluralists like Hans Kung and John Hick, but lumps them all in the same category as triumphalists and imperialists. Surely the last thing either Kung or Hick intended or wanted was triumphalism or any kind of imperialism. Yet this is what Bishop Fernando of Sri Lanka heard even in their work as he listened. In their efforts to build a theory of interreligious dialogue—what most of us probably think of as a commendable effort to understand—he perceived a move to judge and to dominate. Why? He does not elaborate, but in the last sentence quoted he states, "If we really need a model in which all religions can have a place we must work out such a model in dialogue with people of other faiths." In other words, the mere fact that these Western Christians seemed to look down from on high, making judgments and creating theories about all religions and all religious people, is the problem. It doesn't matter what the theory is. The stance itself is imperialistic, I surmise.

I take Fernando's words as a sign pointing the way to overcome the legacy of



Figure 1. (Credit: Sallie B. King)

Christian behavior in Asia and as a way forward in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. That way forward is listening—listening and being led by what we hear. What would it look like if Asian Buddhists took the lead in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue and relationship, if Asian Buddhists set the standards, out of *their* cultural norms and *their* ways of being religious?¹⁷ I can't entirely say, of course; nor should I. However, some images seen among Asian engaged Buddhists do come immediately to mind, pointing out things that I for one have heard from Asian Buddhists.

The first image that comes to mind is an altar I saw in Sri Lanka at the school for deaf children run by the engaged Buddhist group Sarvodaya Shramadana (Fig. 1). On this altar are images of Buddha, Jesus, and Vishnu. No one even pointed it out to me as we were toured through the school. We were just moving from one place to another and walked through a room that had this altar in it. It was not remarkable to them. When I asked about it, the response was: "We have Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu children at this school. We don't want anyone to feel left out." They made it sound entirely natural, easy, and unremarkable.

This is similar to a practice of Thich Nhat Hanh. He speaks of having met profound and holy Christians such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who not only inspired him deeply but also transmitted to him something of the living Christ that resided in them. Having met such people and through them having “touched” the living Christ, he came to regard Christ as one of his own spiritual ancestors and consequently added an image of Jesus to the altar in his hermitage alongside the image of Buddha.¹⁸ Again, he makes it look so easy, so natural and unremarkable: If you have been deeply touched by the spirituality you encounter in another tradition and you want to express your devotion and admiration for that spirituality, you put an image that represents that spiritual tradition in the place that you reserve for spiritual images, and in that way you are reminded of that spirituality and put in touch with it every time you see the image; perhaps you touch your palms together and bow with devotion.

This kind of openness to multiple devotion is not a new thing in Asia. China centuries ago developed the Three Teachings (三教 *sanjiao*) syncretism of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism; it became eminently “normal” there. In Japan most traditional people venerated Buddhas, bodhisattvas, Shinto *kami*, and their ancestors. It was just normal.

In the Sri Lankan case, I had previously heard Ariyaratne saying that the war in Sri Lanka was not a religious war between Hindus and Buddhists, that Hindus and Buddhists got along well in Sri Lanka, and that the war and ethnic conflict was some-



Figure 2. (Credit: Sallie B. King)

thing constructed and hyped up by politicians for their own purposes. I hadn't known what to make of that statement until I visited a Sri Lankan village where an annual ceremony was going on. This was a 100 percent Buddhist village that we visited in 2008, while the war was still going on. In the Buddhist village on the day we visited was a visiting Hindu priest who was performing a *puja* before an image of Ganesha drawn on a rock (Fig. 2) while the entirely Buddhist villagers gathered around and watched. Afterward, everyone shared a feast. When I asked about it, I was told that this ceremony was to ensure the village's prosperity in the coming year and that they had been performing this ceremony annually for centuries. Again, they made it look easy and perfectly natural: Everyone wants prosperity; why would we not do this? Meanwhile, the war continued in the north.¹⁹

I call this kind of thing "interreligious friendliness." I hope it is not an imperialistic term! And I'm not saying that all Asian Buddhists feel this way. I'm just saying that it happens. And I think this is an example of something that many in the West have listened to in Buddhism, have heard, and have put into practice in their own way.

I say this because many Western people who draw upon Buddhist practices and ideas and make them a part of their own religious life evidently do not feel the need to give up their religious identity as Christian (or Jewish), or if they're secular, they may not feel the need to take up a Buddhist identity. Buddhism in the West doesn't draw nearly as many conversions as it does people who treat Buddhism as supplemental to their own, more formally acknowledged, religion. Many Westerners read Buddhist books or practice Buddhist meditation simply because they expect to get some benefit from it. They hope to find inner peace, find happiness, and find a way to think about and experience their lives that works for them. But they don't necessarily feel any need to stop being Christian (or Jewish) to do so.

Probably many Christians would not be comfortable with an altar with images on it from several religions. But as measured by voting with their feet, many Christians have taken Buddhism into their spiritual lives just because it works for them, and without making a dilemma of religious identity out of it. They seem to have imbibed the frequent pattern of Buddhist relaxation around this issue. Or maybe they're just sick and tired of religious exclusivism, perceive Buddhism as non-exclusivist, and find that refreshing.

Some religious authorities and even scholars have tried to control this phenomenon. Pope John Paul II, in his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, infamously (to Buddhists) warned Christians away from Buddhism and Buddhist meditation practices.²⁰ Much less well known is an event in 1979, when the Catholic Academy in Bavaria, Germany, held a congress of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Attenders of the congress took up the question of non-Buddhists practicing Zen and considered whether or not this is right and proper religious behavior. The congress decided that it was not proper, stating that "Buddhist meditation methods ought not be adopted unless the practitioners accept Buddhism's spiritual claim and its otherness, because the practice of Zen is *not* separable from Buddhism."²¹

Much could be said about this. On the one hand, this is exactly what many West-

ern scholars typically think and what I also think, on a purely intellectual, theoretical level: A religion's various parts draw upon all the other parts; the part is distorted without the whole. It's an almost unarguable theory. However, on the other hand, this declaration seems to me the very epitome of the imperialism that Bishop Fernando was talking about. Regardless of what theory says should be the case, in practice, on the ground, religious borrowing is absolutely normal, more the rule than the exception. You can't practice Buddhist meditation without being Buddhist? People do it anyway. Lots of people. What assumptions lie behind the "should" in the view that people "should not" practice Buddhist meditation without being Buddhist? Is there an assumption that Abrahamic notions of religious identity are normative? Yes. Is there an assumption that rationality and doctrinal clarity outweigh practical benefits embraced by people at the grass-roots level? Yes again.

Moreover, this is another place where the concept of voting with our feet comes in handy: No matter what authorities or scholars may say, people are doing otherwise. It is one of the characteristics of our time that religious authorities can no longer so fully control people's religious beliefs and sometimes behavior, first, because of modernism, which teaches us to think for ourselves, and, second, because of the Internet, which gives us endless information and resources. Here indeed the words of Bishop Fernando resonate: To attempt to control these processes with our scholarly judgments does indeed seem worthy of his charges of dominance and imperialism. It's also hopeless.

In thinking about these issues, there is another, and quite contrary, reality on the ground in Buddhist Asia that we should consider: what Robert Bellah called Buddhist "overtolerance." Bellah defines overtolerance this way: "An overtolerant religion is one that fails to communicate its message to important groups in the society and passively assents in their adherence to heterogeneous and often less developed orientations." He goes on, "Buddhism, through passive acceptance of pre-existing religious orientations, frequently found itself overwhelmed by them in time."²²

It has not been the typical Buddhist habit (though there are important exceptions) to draw a strict line between themselves and other religions in their area. While they debated and disagreed, Hindus and Buddhists in India also borrowed enormously from each other. When Buddhism moved into Tibet, it took on Tibetan characteristics, and when it moved into China, it took on Chinese characteristics, in each case radically transforming itself. However, this Buddhist propensity to leave a very porous line between itself and other religions and occasionally to be open to outright syncretism has a downside: overtolerance. When you're not strict about what is Buddhist and what is not Buddhist, you risk losing some of your Buddhist identity, some of what makes you Buddhist.

The instance of this with the most serious consequences was in World War II—era Japan. At that time, Japanese Buddhism had accepted as part of itself so much Shinto and Confucian ethics that it had lost sight of an ethics that Shakyamuni Buddha would have recognized. The result was that not only could Japanese Buddhist leaders by and large not resist their government's imperialism, but many of them also enthusiastically participated in justifying and encouraging the war effort, using words that

were Buddhist but with meanings that were alien to Buddhism, though congruent with at least one reading of Buddhist and Shinto ethics.²³ The Japanese Buddhist leadership, by and large, had lost sight of Buddhism's fundamental values and at least part of the reason why was because their tradition was overtolerant—that is, it had failed to sufficiently differentiate itself from what it was not but let alien values enter and be regarded as Buddhist. These Buddhist leaders clearly thought themselves to be eminently moral people as they urged people to be “one with” the emperor and to sacrifice themselves for the glorious war effort of the country.²⁴ The only problem was that the morality that they advocated was not Buddhist. Interestingly, one of the exceptions to this pattern was the leadership of the Soka Gakkai, which, precisely because they were exclusivistic and drew strict lines between themselves and all other religions, including other forms of Buddhism, refused to submit to Japanese government demands that they endorse and teach the government-approved religious ideology. (They, of course, were sent to prison.)

Another instance of Buddhist overtolerance and its aftermath can be seen in contemporary Taiwan. In China, not only did the three great religions syncretize, but Chinese folk religion also was a typical part of the mix of religious ideas and practices that many, if not most, people accepted. Taiwan today is in the midst of a hugely popular, energetic, and creative Buddhist Renaissance. This Renaissance manifests in the movement called *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教, “Buddhism entering the human world”), known in English as Humanistic Buddhism. Among other things, this movement is a modernizing movement for Buddhism, and one of the necessities of this modernization process is to distinguish Buddhism from what is not Buddhism, especially many folk religious practices that many Taiwanese people think are Buddhist but are not.²⁵ For Taiwanese Buddhists to draw this line between what is Buddhism and what is not is somewhat difficult, because they do have a great deal of tolerance, in the form of interreligious friendliness; nonetheless, they do feel the need to draw this line. At present, it seems that they let some things go and other things not; typically folk religion fares rather poorly in this pruning process. Thus, for example, all the modern Buddhist groups that I visited in Taiwan encourage their followers to continue to practice the Confucian virtue of filial piety—indeed, they insist upon it—but they also insist that their followers stop engaging in the folk practice of burning paper money (so-called hell money) for their deceased family members in the underworld, teaching that this is superstition and, moreover, harmful to the environment.²⁶

Let us return to the theme of dialogue being driven by needs. In the circumstances just described, with Buddhists who have recently come to feel a real need to carefully discern how to differentiate themselves from what they are not, it would indeed be inappropriate for Christians to persistently encourage these Buddhists to come up with Buddhist-based theories encouraging closer relations and sharing among religions. Such behavior might indeed feel dominating and imperialistic to those Buddhists on the receiving side of it, though its intention is very much the opposite. Such a request just doesn't fit the situation, the needs and interests, of those to whom it is addressed. We need to remember that the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is inseparable from civilizational and cultural dialogue. Despite globalization, there remains a

cultural and civilizational gulf between Asia and the West. In this kind of situation, the only thing I can think is that we in the West, whether we consider ourselves Christian, Buddhist, or both, need to do a lot more deep listening. Ideally, when possible, we would go to Buddhist countries; see what Buddhism is on its own turf; look, listen, and learn; and ask questions, but change those questions as the responses come in and the observations shift the assumptions. If we cannot go to Asia, we need to read, listen, and visit local temples and practice centers with the same attitude. We need to be prepared again and again, often with chagrin, to see what our assumptions have been, to put them aside and begin again with renewed modesty.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE NECESSITATES INTRARELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Speaking of deep listening, and of dialogue being driven by needs, one more very important subject remains. In reading through papers from the recent years of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, one theme comes up repeatedly from the Buddhist side, often with considerable urgency: Buddhists are asking those Christians who talk with Buddhists to rein in some of the behavior of the most extreme and aggressive Christian fundamentalists. The most egregious case in recent years is those Korean Christians who in recent years have attacked, vandalized, and burned Buddhist temples in Korea. This request to Christians to rein in this kind of behavior from among their fundamentalists is one of the fruits of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and if we take this dialogue seriously, it seems to me that we need to act upon its findings. So let me put on my Christian hat and talk about we Christians speaking to our own fundamentalists—or better: *listening* to our own fundamentalists.

Some may be surprised to see me speak of listening to our fundamentalists. As a rule, mainstream and liberal Christians, including myself, just want to tell Christian fundamentalists that they're wrong and they should change. But the problem with that approach is simple: It doesn't work. We should not be surprised. We know from interreligious dialogue that you can't go into dialogue with a feeling of superiority and expect your dialogue to go anywhere. The same rule applies in intrareligious dialogue. That attitude will be sniffed out immediately, and the dialogue will degenerate into position defending at best.

I have as much trouble with Christian fundamentalism as anyone. Fortunately, I found myself in a position in which I was forced to listen to Christian fundamentalists. I teach a course on interreligious dialogue, and a significant number of Christian fundamentalists typically take the course. The students in that class are required to speak up and express their views, and, of course, everyone else must listen, including me. Very gradually, by listening, I developed a sincere respect for my fundamentalist students and a good deal of what they were saying. I discovered that many of them made their way to Christian fundamentalism as a reaction against mainstream American culture and what they perceived as its materialistic, self-indulgent values. They were looking for an ideal to which they could wholeheartedly devote themselves. They found that ideal in fundamentalist Christianity because that was the religion that presented itself to them on campus most enthusiastically and effectively. It gave

them an ideal to believe in, a community that shared this ideal, and a disciplined life in service of this ideal. This life required sacrifices; they had to give up some things—other ideals, some scientific findings—in order to embrace the Christian ideal, but they just saw this as part of their self-discipline. They looked down upon liberal Christianity for being weak and compromising its own truth in order to “give in” to science, academia, and other religions.

As I listened to these students, I disagreed about many particulars. But because of the classroom setting, I was in a position where I needed just to listen nonjudgmentally, entirely without any agenda. It was quite a revelation to me to realize how much I held in common with them. Most importantly, I came to sincerely respect them in the way that they take their lives so seriously, in their rejection of materialism and self-indulgence, in their desire to find an ideal and to live for the sake of that ideal. It is not difficult to respect them without having to share their views.

This story reminds me of *chang bu qing pusa* (常不輕菩薩 Never-Disparaging or Ever-Respectful Bodhisattva) (Fig. 3). He appears in the twentieth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* as a monk who bowed to everyone he met, saying that they were all certain to attain Buddhahood. When I was in Taiwan, I was deeply moved when I approached the Kaohsiung temple of the Xiang Guang (Luminary Nuns) order and saw a statue of Ever-Respectful Bodhisattva in the doorway, bowing respectfully to each person who approached with no consideration of their place in society, their gender, their age, or, we might add, the amount of delusion they might or might not have in their mind. Can liberal Christians emulate Ever-Respectful Bodhisattva and bow to Christian fundamentalists? To say the same thing in other words: Can we show our respect by open-minded, nonjudgmental deep listening?

In all fairness, there is a parallel request that I think many Christians would like to put to Buddhists. Just as Buddhists would like to see Christians rein in their own fundamentalists, I feel sure that many Christians would like to see Buddhists rein in their own nationalists. I am thinking of Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka, including many monks, who regard Sri Lankan Tamils as second-class citizens at best and who have advocated and supported very strong measures not only against the Tamil Tigers but sometimes against the Tamil people as well, notably during the closing phase of the war when uncounted numbers of Tamil noncombatants died or were injured or displaced. Certainly A. T. Ariyaratne has devoted decades to working on this cause in all its dimensions, and Sulak Sivaraksa has spoken out strongly and clearly against Sri Lankan war crimes.²⁷ There have been others who have spoken out. However, I think it is fair to say that there was a great deal of silence from the Buddhist world as Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism developed, intensified, and came to its bloody climax.

I am thinking also of Buddhist nationalism in Burma, which recently has manifested in the form of terrible attacks and atrocities against the Rohingya Muslim minority living in the west of Burma and other Burmese Muslims. Brutal attacks on Burmese Muslims have been going on for years and accelerating of late. Where is the Buddhist response? It seems not to be a normal practice for Buddhists, across national lines, to call each other to task for violating the most fundamental moral values and behavioral norms of the religion. This is difficult for Christians to understand or

accept. This is a subject on which both inter- and intrareligious dialogue would be welcome.

A fruit of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is the hope that each of us will engage our own fundamentalists or nationalists, certainly with respect to any violent behavior, but also by engaging ordinary intolerance and unthinking feelings of superiority. Engage, certainly, but how? Does this mean that we need to confront them, or denounce them? This is exactly the kind of point upon which Buddhist-Christian dialogue would be welcome and helpful. What is morally incumbent upon us? And



Figure 3. (Credit: Zizhu Linjingshe [紫竹林精舍 Purple Bamboo Monastery])

what works? Venerable Sheng Yen had some good advice on this. In speaking of the problem of religiously motivated terrorism, he said that the “most thoroughly effective means” for combating terrorism is to “Call upon all people of love and wisdom, to employ all means and approaches to constantly extend, whenever it is appropriate, our friendship towards every ethnic group, region and individual who is prone to terrorism. Let them know that they are not alone or helpless and let them feel the warmth of care, respect and acceptance.”²⁸ Fine words, and words that could be applied to Christian fundamentalists and Buddhist nationalists as well as terrorists of any kind.

CONCLUSION

It seems that my conclusion on both interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue is the same: We need more listening—deep, respectful, open-minded, extensive listening. The more we are in a position of power or dominance, the more it is true that we need to speak less and listen more. We in the West in particular need to stop talking so much and listen a lot more. In that spirit, I draw my comments to a close. Perhaps Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva can have the last word (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. (Credit: Zizhu Linjingshe [紫竹林精舍 Purple Bamboo Monastery])

NOTES

1. See Rita M. Gross, "Introduction," in Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck, *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha* (New York: Continuum, 2000), pp. 11–12; and Grace Burford, "Asymmetry, Essentialism, and Covert Cultural Imperialism: Should Buddhists and Christians Do Theoretical Work Together?" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31 (2011).
2. Rita M. Gross, "Conclusion," in Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck, *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), p. 150ff.
3. See Rita M. Gross, "Introduction," in Gross and Muck, *Buddhists Talk About Jesus*, p. 12.
4. For example, Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1998); D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002).
5. John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford, UK: One-world Publications, 2009).
6. See Knitter, *Without Buddha*, pp. 3–4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*; and Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000).
10. See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
11. Venerable Sheng Yen, "Eliminating Barriers, Enhancing Mutual Respect and Love," in *Establishing Global Ethics* (Taipei: Sheng Yen Education Foundation, 2008), p. 7.
12. Christianity was itself violently suppressed in Japan, with the Japanese government using torture to try to force the Japanese Christians to renounce their faith and executing those who refused. In contrast to widespread Asian Buddhist resentment of Christian missionary behavior, awareness of Japanese Christian martyrdoms is quite limited.
13. Venerable Tze Sheh Fu, quoted in Yu-ing Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1995), p. 66.
14. Cheng Yen, "Performing Good Deeds Is More Important Than Shunning Evil Ones," *Inspirational Extracts*, May 1, 2001. <http://www.tzuchi.net/MindMap.nsf/836a9f1c801ca09f48256b7a00296f5ae53c3e67be962d2648256bb10004f60e?OpenDocument>; accessed February 27, 2013.
15. Venerable Sheng Yen, "A Common Path," in *Establishing Global Ethics* (Taipei: Sheng Yen Education Foundation, 2008), p. 94.
16. Kenneth Fernando, "Buddhism, Christianity and Their Potential for Peace: A Christian Perspective," in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004* (Norwich, Norfolk, UK: SCM Press, 2005), p. 223.
17. Admittedly, for years many Western Christians have been beseeching people of other religions and nationalities to take the lead in the dialogue, to very little avail.
18. Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, p. 6.
19. Kenneth Fernando also noted that "it has not been a conflict between the Sinhala and Tamil people because in all parts of the country, except the north, the two communities still live in harmony and there is no persecution by either of the two communities. The conflict is between the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the government forces of Sri Lanka." Fernando, "Buddhism, Christianity," pp. 216–217.
20. His Holiness John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 89–90.
21. Whalen Lai and Michael von Bruck, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue*, translated by Phyllis Jestice (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 180.

The authors added parenthetically that in their opinion this was the right position to take. For their information on the congress, the authors drew upon H. Waldenfels, ed., *Begegnung mit dem Zen-Buddhismus* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1980).

22. Robert N. Bellah, "Epilogue: Religion and Progress in Modern Asia," in Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1965), pp. 191–192.

23. See Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); and Sallie B. King, "The Genesis and Decay of Responsibility in Buddhism" in *Taking Responsibility: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Winston Davis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), pp. 173–195.

24. See Victoria, *Zen at War*.

25. This is the intention behind Venerable Sheng Yen's extremely popular book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* (Elmhurst, NY: Dharma Drum Publications, 2007). See pp. 9, 19–20.

26. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 74–76, 84–86.

27. See http://www.sulak-sivaraksa.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=292&Itemid=67; accessed February 27, 2013.

28. Venerable Sheng Yen, "Violence and Terrorism in Religion," in *Establishing Global Ethics*, p. 68.

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