



A Theravada Buddhist-Christian consultation
Towards a culture of religious diversity and communal harmony
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I am honoured by WCC for inviting me to participate in this 'globally responsible' dialogue among Christian and Theravada Buddhist leaders. I appreciate that WCC chooses a very important topic for our consultation in our pluralistic contexts. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

I will divide my talk into two parts, that is, first, Buddhist attitudes towards religious diversity and particularly towards Christianity and second, how we could promote healthy communal harmony in spite of our differences.

Religious diversity and Theravada Buddhism

Actually, Buddhism sees '**everything as it is**' or relates to '**everything as they are**'.ⁱⁱ Religious diversity is the fact that exists in this world. We should then relate to different beliefs as they are. That is to say, while we learn objectively about the unique beliefs, attitude, emotion and practices, we should accept and respect all the different components to which they belong. For example, Christianity as a monotheistic religion, the whole concept of the Christian God in trinity and theodicy are very difficult for most Theravada Buddhists to understand. Is God the Father the same person as Jesus the Son? Why does God as the omnipotent and merciful God allow tremendous disasters, violence and war to kill billions of innocent people? These kinds of questions may be meaningless and useless to ask when people have faith in God but are questions Buddhists will ask. Although this is one major doctrinal difference, Buddhists are encouraged to learn and respect this Christian identity as it is.

What is religious diversity according to a Buddhist perspective?

During the Buddha's time, there were a lot of religious teachers and spiritual leaders who taught and practised different doctrines. The Buddha even answered questions about criteria for consideringⁱⁱⁱ which belief to be true by letting human beings themselves try and experience it. When they realise such truth does not introduce suffering, then they may follow it. Above all, it is noted that ***the teaching of interconnectedness of all things (paticcasamuppada)*** is always stressed in Buddhism. For our context of religious diversity, the word 'interconnectedness' may refer to a number of things, that there is more than one, therefore it may also imply a sense of 'diversity'. Put in another way, the concept of diversity is not unusual to Buddhism. 'Diversity' could also include both similarities and differences. This is also true and is a common ground for both Buddhism and Christianity.

Moreover, Prof. George Lindbeck mentions the interrelationships of religions in several ways such as 'complete to incomplete, different expressions of similar experiences, complementary, opposed, and authentic or inauthentic.' (Lindbeck 1984, 53) These interrelationships of religion may be considered as a characteristic of our religious diversity. It does not mean that each religion within religious diversity is covered in all above aspects. For our consultation, I would like to point to some aspects related to our Buddhist and Christian contexts and give some examples from both philosophical and everyday life to illustrate our common ground of religions. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that we realise the different and sophisticated details of each religion.

Some different expressions of similar experiences

As a philosophical observation, one should note that both Buddhism and Christianity share the same experience of the human limitation in talking about the ultimate as being beyond any determination. We may use different expressions to describe what is our religious experience of *Nibbana* in Buddhism and what *Kingdom of God* is in Christianity. But we may try to explain them by a similar methodology such as through a religious language of paradox. That is to say, both *Nibbana* and *Kingdom of God* cover both senses of 'immanence' and 'transcendence'. What does it mean when we say 'God is personal?' What will be the understandable reasons when Buddhists say '*Nirvana* is in *Samsara* (a circle of birth, decay and death)? These two notions need to apply the formula of affirmative explanation as 'including' meaning and the negative one as 'transcending' meaning in order to understand the ultimate reality as in accordance with our limited human capability. Both Buddhism and Christianity are struggling hard to encourage people to realise the valuable possibility in applying the concept of the ultimate reality in the present time of influential modernity and secularism. Therefore it is not surprising to see the reinterpretation that '*Kingdom of God is now and not yet, which is a paradox,*' or '*Nibbana is here and now*' or all can 'taste' the truth at the present time of this life. I guess that Christianity may also have been encountering the doubts of young modern people concerning the question of the difficulty to enter the Kingdom of God as well as the time of the Kingdom of God. The same applies as Buddhists hardly expect enlightenment to be easy or reaching the state of *Nibbana*. Therefore another common ground for us is the effort to reinterpret and reformulate our teachings to attract the understanding and realisation of people. For example, people may experience the Kingdom now on earth when they exercise any activities with agape and love towards others. It is this unconditioned love which goes beyond all shades of differences whether racism, or sexism or any social and political status. Anyone who practices this equal concern of love is claimed to enter the Kingdom of God. Certainly, I understand that salvation in Christianity has to be derived from grace of God but through this kind of reinterpretation people may be encouraged and begin to appreciate the value of religion and then eventually to translate these good news into proper actions. Buddhists need a similar effort to understand that 'the temporary *Nibbana*' could take place whenever people

are able to get rid of egoism, 'me and mine'. For instance, we can experience this temporary state of *Nibbana* after making merit when our state of mind is not worried, jealous, angry and selfish. Such state of mind should be our basic consideration to prevent any negative attitudes in our daily life.

In addition, both Buddhism and Christianity may not need to spend much time to teach what the Buddha taught or what Jesus Christ said but more emphasis should be an attempt to testify how we can apply these abstract concepts to respond to our common concerns of daily suffering such as economic crisis, political conflicts, various kinds of violence and so on.

Moreover, talking about the relationship of religions in terms of different expressions of similar experiences, *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* a Thai Theravada Buddhist monk and great interpreter of Buddhism, reflects his understanding of religious diversity by proposing 'everyday language' or 'human language' and '*Dhamma* language' to explain the concept of 'religion'. For everyday language, the term 'religion' includes a variety of different shapes of monasteries, churches and various religious practices and we may have different names of religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and so on. But according to *Dhamma* language, any religion is 'the life of renunciation.' (From 'I' and 'mine') (Swearer n.d , 62) In Christianity, Prof. John Hick, a philosopher of religion and theologian supports that 'salvation is understood as the actual transformation of human life from self-centeredness to Reality centered-ness.' (Hick 1986, 151) This reading reminds me to think that both religious interpreters are using different expressions of similar essence to talk about the authentic role of religions as renunciation towards Reality-centered-ness whether *Nibbana* or the *Kingdom of God*. Certainly, it is true that there is the opposed position when you come closer to these two ultimate realities such as the state of no self for *Nibbana*, whereas the happy eternal life or self in the *Kingdom of God*. However, the reinterpretation of both religious philosophers of Theravada Buddhism and Christianity open enough room for us to the reassurance that other religions provide the salvation or liberation for their followers to reach the highest goal. This is what John Hick defines as 'pluralism'^{iv}, which I consider as the best starting point to keep in mind when we go towards religious diversity.

Complementary

Furthermore, it is also necessary to emphasise that in spite of religious diversity, both Christianity and Buddhism can learn and be complementary to each other both through philosophical and experiential dialogue including the dialogue of life. That is, a lot of Christians are interested to learn about and practise insight meditation (*Vipassana*) which works remarkably well to reduce tension, stress and increase mindful action in a world of the competitive life styles. The teaching, which is behind practising *Vipassana* meditation, focuses on mindfulness in action of every moment in the present daily life. Awareness and wisdom follows upon such practice. The peaceful mind may reduce and even erase any conflicts so as not to foster any kind of violence.

Similarly, Christianity is strong in responding to the impact of globalisation. I,

myself as a Buddhist have learned a lot from the explanation of the notion in Christianity that human beings were created in the image of God. That is, it is known that one face of globalisation is a threat, which has led people's to put their emphasis on material value more than on human value.

Globalisation usually goes hand in hand with the progress of technology. "When the technological mentality is dominant, people are viewed and treated like objects." (Barbour 1980, 43) The emphasis is the same for every one, whether rich or poor, Chinese or Thai, man or woman, happy or broken family; all share the same 'human dignity'. Human beings were created in the image of God, which means that the 'person-hood' of everyone is valuable and sanctified; each one processes autonomous and individual identity. Personally, the concept of the image of God, which leads to the cultivation of self-esteem and confidence in light of religious teaching, challenges me very much to search for Buddhist teachings involving aspects such as increasing human dignity and human security. This example may affirm us that exploring and learning about the religious diversity of others is likely to deepen your own traditional belief. Put in another way, the more globally religious diversity one deals with, the more locally religious identity one sharpens.

On the level of action, I will talk more when we think about the actions for communal harmony.

What is communal harmony?

Theravada Buddhism focuses on people's liberation by human beings' own effort, or by work (*Kamma*) or by insight meditation. It means that human beings are put as the centre for their own spiritual journey. No one controls or makes a plan for anyone. Every thing is under the natural law or cosmic law, that is no-self, impermanence, and suffering including the law of cause and effect (*law of kamma*). Anyone who realises and regularly applies such law as guidance to his or her daily life and also avoids the root causes of evil, such as unlimited desire, hatred and delusion will certainly experience the consequences of inner harmony in his/her life. Although in Christianity God is focused as 'the ground of being,' and possesses the sovereign plan and will for people, human beings still have the freedom and responsibility for their own consequences as well. If I'm not wrong I understand that John Calvin gave a very good example to support this notion. That is, although we know that our life's destiny is in the hands of God, we still need to be mindful and take good care of our life. For example, when we cross a street, we still need to carefully watch out with open eyes. My point is that harmony and not chaos will take place when each one of us is conscious and responsible for our own actions. Although Theravada Buddhists and Christians hold a different nature of belief, harmony for life and for community needs to begin with us as well. That is, when a small unit is in good balance and in good order, the consequences will affect the communal harmony in society as the whole.

Religious diversity and conversion

Significantly speaking, harmony will cover the concept of moral justice and

peace both at ordinary and inner levels. Human beings have a duty to maintain harmony according to the ways in each tradition. Besides, in light of our religious diversity context, we need more skilful means to handle all differences. In other words, the concrete urgent issue we are encountering is the sign of tense relations between Christians and Buddhists in Asia on the issue of mission activities and conversion.

It is true that both Theravada Buddhists and Christians have their own mission to share their own faith with others. In Buddhism, the Buddha advised his monks:

Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many,
for the happiness of the many, out of compassion
for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness
of gods and men (people). (Vin.IV:28)

Therefore, it is not unusual to proclaim the belief of our own tradition to others. Optimistically speaking, all mission activities derive from the loving kindness and compassion to others in Buddhist terms, from the agape love to our neighbours in Christian notions. However, although one possesses the good intention (*cetana*), one needs to select the skilful means, which are never based on greed, anger and delusion (lack of enough information). This should apply to mission as well. Let me share with you the Buddha's means towards conversion. Once a man, named *Upali* expressed his desire to become a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha cautioned him by saying:

O householder, make a thorough investigation first. It is advisable for a distinguished man like you to make a thorough investigation. (M.I:379)

It implies that there should be room for freedom for people to rethink, to reconsider and to decide carefully what to believe. At the same time it may refer to the sense of respect of the existence of that person's previous belief. However, sympathetic imagination and respect for hearing, seeing the different teaching and practices are required here. I think the process of inter-religious dialogue could play a great role to smooth unpleasant conversion. It is noted that first of all, we always need to make our rightful understanding about the nature and process of dialogue. For the Christian side, some people may be afraid that the process may interrupt their work and mission owing to the need of compromise. In fact, there is no need to compromise or practice 'lazy tolerance' or even losing one's own religious identity. For Buddhist awareness, some may understand that dialogue is a tool of searching for new members and conversion. Both need to learn that the real purpose of dialogue is for spiritual and inner growth, (Streng 1985, 244) between both partners in dialogue. It is the process of 'learning (about other people's belief), growing (for better attitude and co-operation) and changing' (the misunderstanding, prejudice) (Swidler 1987, 6) Change may include conversion as well but one should let it happen naturally and not purposely. In fact, both Christians and Buddhists have the same chance to convert each other in the process of dialogue. Brother Chia (Chia 2001, 181)

calls it a 'win-win conversion' (in the sense of sharing with) not 'win-over conversion.' (in the sense of imperialism) Why should we let the concept of conversion take place **naturally** in the process of dialogue? Because both of us are using both objective (learn about information of our friends' beliefs) and subjective methods (our presupposition of the deepest value of our own belief) to share in the process. Through the subjective method, one may share one's own religious experience; if the partner appreciates any change, conversion may take place. In other words, Buddhists are as equal as Christians to persuade, make better understanding and change including conversion in the proper manner of respect and sincerity. We may realise that encountering different convictions and meeting opposition to one's own religious presupposition needs a lot of inner values and practices. But it is really challenging for us to learn and grow.

Alternative possibility for religious communal harmony

Concerning our religious communal harmony, I believe it is necessary that we learn from each other, in order to get enough information about the method of doing mission of our Christian friends. We consider that the lack of enough information could be called delusion (*moha*), which is one root cause of chaos and all miseries. For example, the method of contextualization and inculturation may be questionable for some Buddhists in Thailand.

Above all, religious and cultural diversity may sometimes be used as the effective tools for human hatred, conflicts that will lead to severe violence. Some violent incidents in Sri Lanka, Cambodia and even in the south of Thailand now, seems to further the misunderstanding of what the real religious message is about. Thus, I really agree with the heritage of *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* that we need:

1. to realise the heart or core of one's own religion and to help others to realise the heart of their own religion,
2. to work together for mutual good understanding, and
3. to work to develop co-operation among all religions so that they can work together to drag the world out from under the tyranny of materialism. (Santikaro Bhikkhu 2001, 82)

These above teachings especially the 1st and 2nd ones support us when entering into inter-religious dialogue. The third teaching reflects the greed, which is another root cause for much suffering such as corruption, ecological crisis, including the structural violence in this world. I'm quite sure when each one of us learns about the real teaching and puts it into practice, it may not be necessary to label which religious teaching we believe; most religions share similar moral values of love, compassion and forgiveness. The two basic ethical principles of humanity have much in common: 'every human being must be treated humanly' and 'what you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.' The same could be said when we analyse 'a Global Ethic', which includes four imperatives of humanity: (1. have respect for all life, 2. deal honestly and fairly, 3. speak and act truthfully and 4. respect and love one another) (Kung 2003, 15). We may recognise that the content is similar to our basic moral teaching for justice such as the five precepts in Buddhism and the ten commandments in Christianity. This is the sharing

richness of characteristic of religious diversity. We could therefore, Buddhists and Christians, have a close relationship as brothers and sisters and become authentic followers without in confrontation identifying ourselves as who we are. This is what Prof. Lindbeck calls a kind of interrelationships of religions as authentic to inauthentic. In other words, we should take this benefit of religious diversity and create harmonious communities through inter-religious relationship.

To repeat, it is urgent to encourage our people to learn about the correct religious teaching but it seems that there is a big problem in our process of learning. Although we know our good doctrinal teaching, some of us seldom apply it to our daily life. How can we be successful in introducing the complete process of learning which begins with receiving information — reflection — value judgement— decision making—taking action and eagerness to learn more and more? We would like to search for more religious knowledge, when we realise that there is valuable teaching that can be effective in solving problems. By this proper process of learning, good teaching will bring harmony to community and the globe, not ending the process of listening to good news and great teaching leading to good action.

Moreover, it is necessary to recognise the goals and roles of engaged Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand and other countries in Asia, Europe and America because this group focuses on the social problems of the world. They consider 'outer work,' involved with social issues such as social and economic injustice, human rights, poverty, ecological devastation, gender issues, including inter-religious relationship as the way to practice 'inner work' or spiritual development. In other words, service-based practice is a way of mindfulness-based practice (Christopher 2000, 8). This movement may reduce the charge for Theravada Buddhism that 'Buddhists are indifferent to the world's material problems' as well. This may also confirm that one of our common concerns should be to try to reduce our problems affected by the progress of science, economic and influential mass media in the age of globalisation by the channel of religions. The co-operation for resolving conflicts and global problems are also the appropriate dialogue of life we need today. In our countries, *Dhammayattra* (*Dhamma* walk) has been organised from time to time to send a signal to warn and solve our ecological problems. The same Dhamma walk also takes place by the monastic community in Cambodia in calling for removing the landmines to save the lives of people there. This Dhamma walk is one kind of dialogue of life and experience among Buddhist and friends from other religions as well.

Finally, what we should pay attention to in our religious diversity context is how we can bring a solution and suggestion from our consultation and dialogue to reach groups of people who have been involved with violent conflicts in the name of religion. I am still searching for satisfactory answers.

However, I am very pleased with the initiative of the WCC to invite some Christian and Theravada Buddhist leaders who have the connection and some relationship to the average followers in order to have conflict prevention before any tensions become violence. Personally, I also would like to learn

more and have both inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue with my Christian and Buddhist friends from many countries for our communal harmony.

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Footnotes

i. Prof. Paul Knitter suggests the best way to pursue inter-religious dialogue is to base that dialogue on a commitment to 'global responsibility'. Please see for more detail in his book, Knitter, Paul F.(1995) *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global responsibility*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

ii. Normally this teaching is derived from 'nothing whatever should be grasped at or clung to'.

iii. This criteria to deal with doubtful matters is derived from *Kalamasutta* which is: be not let by report, be not led by tradition, be not let by hearsay, be not let by the authority of texts, be not let by mere logic, be not led by inference, be not let by considering appearances, be not led by the agreement with a considered and approved theory, be not let by seeming possibilities and be not led by the idea, 'this is our teacher'.

iv. According to John Hick, pluralism is 'the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the religious traditions. There is not merely one but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation.'