

Buddhist-Christian Relations Today

James FREDERICKS

今日佛教與基督教的關係

James FREDERICKS

[ABSTRACT] Despite the long history of Buddhist-Christian contacts, serious Buddhist-Christian dialogue is for the most part relatively recent. Timothy Richard and Karl Ludvig Reichelt took important steps in developing Buddhist-Christian understanding in the twentieth century. In some places today there are serious tensions. Some Evangelical Christians continue to view Buddhism very critically as a form of idolatry, and in South Korea there have been attacks by Christians on Buddhist institutions. In Sri Lanka, some Buddhists have been very critical of Christians and have attacked Christian institutions. Nonetheless, in most regions relations are good, and in many areas there has been extensive dialogue as well as cooperation on humanitarian projects. Humanistic Buddhists and the Buddhist Risshokoseikai movement highly value interreligious dialogue and cooperation with Christians and other religious traditions, and many Christians share their concerns. In Japan the work of Buddhist philosopher Kitaro Nishida and Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo illustrate the profound differences between the Buddhist and Catholic worldviews and paths. Outside of Asia, there are major differences between the immigrant Buddhist communities,

who interpret their tradition in profoundly different contexts, and the convert Buddhist communities, many of whom come from a Christian background; as a result their relations with Christians differ in important ways. Some Christians have engaged in meditation practice under the guidance of Buddhists and report major benefits. Some practitioners claim to belong to both the Buddhist and Christian traditions, but the author questions the theological coherence of this dual practice.

Relations between Christians and those who follow other religious paths are shaped by multiple factors. The tensions that impact Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian relations arise from a long history of conflict. Christian relations with Jews and Muslims, however, are also shaped by their monotheism – even though Jewish, Christian and Muslim monotheisms are by no means identical. Hindu-Christian relations are complicated by the legacy of British colonialism and Hindu nationalism. Assessing Christian relations with Hindus, however, is simplified by the fact that these relations are mostly confined, geographically speaking, to the India sub-continent, despite the increasing importance of the Hindu diaspora in North America and Europe.

Christian relations with Buddhists, however, are not shaped by a long history of conflict as is the case with relations with Jews and Muslims, although the colonial legacy is a significant factor in some parts of the world. Moreover, relations between Christians and Buddhists are not molded by monotheism, or even theism for that matter. Neither is the relationship between Christians and Buddhists determined by a single political or social context. On the contrary, Buddhist-Christian relations differ significantly in various parts of the world today. As a result, it is impossible to generalize about the

relationship. In this essay, I aim to document how Buddhist-Christian relations differ by locale.

Let me offer three preliminary examples of how locale shapes Buddhist-Christian relations. First, in some parts of the world, tiny communities of Buddhists are surrounded by a society made up largely of Christians and shaped by Christian thinking. This means that the vast majority of Australians are unaware of the Buddha's birthday, let alone that it is an important celebration for many Buddhists. Australian Buddhists, however, cannot but be aware of the birthday of Jesus. The reverse is true in other parts of the world. Tiny minorities of Christians live in a society shaped, in part at least, by Buddhism. Few Taiwanese know when Easter comes or what this Christian feast is about. In some parts of the world, the majority community is largely unaware of the minority community. Second, determining who a Buddhist is can be difficult. This is especially true in parts of Asia where religious practice is often not a matter of a self-chosen affiliation. Being religious does not entail a decision to join one group instead of another. A Chinese person, for example, sees no difficulty in being Buddhist in some respects and Daoist in other respects without ever ceasing to be Confucian. This is not the case with Christianity. Theoretically at least, Christianity is a chosen identity. To be a Christian entails a conscious choice to affiliate with a church, at least to some degree. This being the case, identifying who is a Christian can be much easier than determining who is a Buddhist. A third problem is presented by the fact that, in different parts of the world, Buddhists and Christians live side-by-side in very different political environments. In some places, religions are controlled by the state. In other places, Christians or Buddhists have a great deal of influence in the government. The history and the politics of these societies affect Buddhist-Christian relations in significant ways.

This essay surveys Buddhist-Christian relations in various parts of the world. It is by no means complete. Moreover, the aim of the essay is to provide scope, not depth. I have chosen a wide range of locations with the hope of demonstrating how different Buddhist-Christian relations can be in different parts of the world. For the sake of organizational clarity, I separate Asian locales from locales outside of Asia. In the locales outside of Asia that I treat, I separate Christian relations with immigrant Buddhist communities from Christian relations with convert Buddhist communities. I also include some material on Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia

Mainland China

The encounter between Buddhists and Christians in Mainland China was generally superficial prior to the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and has been minimal afterward. The Jesuits that came to China in the 16th and 17th centuries were deeply impressed by Chinese civilization and engaged in lively debates with learned Buddhists. Missionaries, Protestant as well as Catholic, came to China in the 19th century with the view that Christianity was destined by the plan of God to replace Buddhism. However, there is a precedent for creative exchanges today. Timothy Richard (1845-1919), a Protestant missionary met and befriended Yang Wen-hui (1837-1911), a Buddhist lay-person. Together, they translated Buddhist scriptures into English. Richard attempted to "Christianize" Buddhism by interpreting it in Christian categories. In addition, Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952) became an accomplished student of Buddhism in the belief that Buddhist teachings would lead to a deepening of Christian faith. Reichelt was a visionary. He

established a “Christian monastery” where Buddhist monks were welcome to visit which anticipated Buddhist-Christian monastic exchanges today. Eventually, this center was moved to Hong Kong and continues his work today.¹

After 1949, prospects for a creative encounter between Buddhists and Christians were dimmed by the Communist Party’s attempts to keep religious organizations under the control of the state. Communication, let alone cooperation, between Buddhists and Christians was seen as a potential threat. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) devastated Buddhism in China. Monasteries were destroyed. Monks were either forced to marry or placed in labor camps. Christianity suffered as well and was condemned as a foreign religion associated with imperialism. On the Mainland, neither Buddhists nor Christians have been in a position to encounter one another in any depth.

Data about the attitudes of Buddhists and Christians toward one another are scarce. Preliminary findings indicate that ordinary Chinese people tend to think of the Buddha as a deity equal to or higher than the Christian God. Many see Christianity as a foreign religion in a way that Buddhism is not. Protestant Christians tend to have a low opinion of Buddhist doctrine, sometimes labeling it superstition and idolatry. However, they are on good terms with Buddhist people, which is another indication of the pragmatic approach to religion characteristic of the Chinese. The so-called “underground” Catholic Church has been largely cut off from developments since the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965)

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of these historical events, see Lai Pan-chiu, *Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Modern China* (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2003). Also see Whalen Lai and Michael von Bruch, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of their Dialogue* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 68-103.

regarding relations with other religions. This part of the Church is conservative by international standards and not affected by Catholicism's current openness to other religions. The presence of Evangelical Christians operating "house churches" that are independent of the state is beginning to be a problem for the Chinese government. Chinese people in general do not approve of the militant proselytizing.²

The liberalization of Chinese society has begun to have an impact on Buddhist-Christian relations. In November of 2003, Professor Wu Yansheng (Shaanxi Normal University), Professor Wang Xiaochao (Centre for the Study of Morality and Religion, Tsinghua University, Beijing), and Professor Lai Pan-chiu (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) succeeded in organizing the first formal interreligious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians since the establishment of the People's Republic. In order to host the conference, Shaanxi Normal University established an Institute for Buddhist Studies. Since this meeting, academic exchanges have continued.

Hong Kong

Exchanges are a relatively new development on the Mainland. This is not the case with Hong Kong. There are several organizations supported by various Christian and Buddhist groups dedicated to building bridges of understanding and cooperation between the two religions. Tao Fong Shan, a Protestant organization, continues the pioneering work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt. In addition, the Christian

² Li Xianping, "A Case Study of Interreligious Relations in Contemporary China: Buddhist-Christian Interaction in Four Southeast Cities" in *Ching Feng* Vol. 5:1 (2004), pp. 93-118.

Study Center on Chinese Religion and Culture was established in 1957 to promote interreligious dialogue. Hong Kong also has a Joint Secretariat for the Colloquium of Religious Leaders. This organization includes multiple religions, not just Christianity and Buddhism. With groups of this size and scope, dialogue regarding religious teachings and practice tends to be superficial. The Joint Secretariat, therefore, has decided to concentrate on practical matters and has been very successful in promoting interreligious cooperation. For example, the Joint Secretariat has produced a number of statements having to do with community affairs. Statements have been crafted on moral education and peace among religions. Various religious organizations came together to produce a statement critical of the United States' preparations for the invasion of Iraq. Signatories included the International Buddhist Progress Society, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Christian Institute, and the Committee for Ecumenical and Ecclesiastical Relationship of the Hong Kong Christian Council. The declaration was published in several secular and religious newspapers in Hong Kong.³

Activities and programs such as these come from the leadership level. What can be said about Buddhist-Christian relations among ordinary people in Hong Kong? Among Buddhists, there is neither hostility toward Christianity nor a particular enthusiasm for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Meetings for dialogues concerning doctrinal matters are almost always initiated by Christians from Mainline Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic organizations. This fact, however, does not mean that all Christians take a positive view of interreligious dialogue. Most Protestants believe that

³ For a comprehensive view of interreligious relations in Hong Kong, see Peter K.H. Lee, "The Way of Interreligious Dialogue: The Hong Kong Experience," in *Interreligio* Vol. 34 (Winter, 1998), pp. 2-15.

dialogue with Buddhists has no purpose aside from being a tool of evangelization. There have been occasional tensions between Buddhists and Christians in Hong Kong as well. For example, Buddhists campaigned in 1997 to have Buddha's birthday declared an official public holiday. Part of their motivation was the perception that the government of Hong Kong was favoring certain Christian groups. When the birthday was celebrated for the first time as a holiday in 1999, advertisements appeared on buses speaking of waging "spiritual warfare" against the sin of "worshiping gods and Buddhas." This incident, however, must not be allowed to overshadow the fact that there are multiple institutions in Hong Kong that are well established and respected in the community dedicated to promoting cooperation and religious exchanges between Buddhists and Christians.⁴

Taiwan

With increases in prosperity and education, Buddhism is flourishing on Taiwan. There are several Buddhist organizations, centered on a charismatic founder, that include monks, nuns and enormous numbers of disciples. These organizations have been shaped by the "humanistic Buddhism" of Dharma Master Yin Shun (1906-2005) who was inspired by the motto, "All Buddhas arise in the human world; no one achieves Buddhahood in heaven." Thus, Buddhism in Taiwan has been reformed and modernized in order to speak to ordinary people and their contemporary religious and material needs. The centrality of these great Buddhist organizations also means that Buddhism is becoming a matter of self-chosen

⁴ Lai Pan-chiu, "The Role of Hong Kong in the Buddhist-Christian Encounter in China: A Post-Conference Reflection," in *Ching Feng* Vol. 5:1 (2004), pp. 119-133.

affiliation for many Taiwanese people. Somewhere between seven and fifteen percent of Taiwanese would self-identify exclusively as Buddhists.⁵ These facts have important implications for Buddhism's relationship with Christians.

For humanistic Buddhism, interreligious dialogue and cooperation are important. For example, Dharma Master Hsing Yun, the founder of the Fo Guang Shan movement, emphasizes the importance of good relations among the various religions as a way of promoting peace. Dharma Master Shin Dao, founder of the Ling Jiao Shan movement, has built the Museum of the World's Religions in Taipei. The mission of the museum is to educate visitors about the various religious traditions of the world, and also to provide a venue for creative exchanges among religious believers.⁶ In addition, the Tzu Chi Foundation, which is focused on providing social services, has a record of cooperation with various Christian organizations. On the Christian side, the Matteo Ricci Institute and Fu Ren University are Catholic organizations which regularly sponsor exchanges between the two religions. In addition, from 2000 to 2003 an important series of exchanges took place between the Modern Chan Society and the Chinese Lutheran Seminary. Themes discussed included ultimate truth and its expression, the divine and the Buddha Nature and justification by faith. Master Li Yuansong (1957-2003), the founder of the Modern Chan Society, is a fine example of someone who recognized the spiritual dimension of interreligious dialogue. Courageous and creative in his quest for truth, he allowed his Buddhist faith to be challenged and transformed by his encounter with Christian believers. In the view of some observers, the Christian

⁵ Vermander Benoit S.J. "Religions in Taiwan: Between Mercantilism and Millenarianism," in *Inter-Religio* (Taipei Ricci Institute, winter 1998), pp. 63-75.

⁶ Maria Reis Habito, "The Taipai, Taiwan, Museum of World Religions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 22 (2002), pp. 203-205.

participation was more apologetic than courageous.⁷ Perhaps a more optimistic view would be to say that this encounter serves to illustrate that interreligious dialogue is a skill that takes many years to cultivate.

Korea

In Korea, Christian behavior toward Buddhists is divided sharply into intolerance and even violence on the one hand and openness and esteem on the other. Roman Catholics and some Protestants have cordial relations with the Buddhists. Unfortunately, this is not the case with many Evangelical Protestants whose intolerance of their Buddhist neighbors is a scandal to Christian faith. This situation is an indication that the traditional religious eclecticism of the Korean people has become, for good or for ill, a matter of religious affiliation.

Evangelical Christian intolerance is rooted in their conviction that everyone outside their church dwells in darkness and is bereft of grace. There is no salvation outside the Christian faith. Some Evangelicals associate Buddhism with idolatry and demon worship. Incidents of violence and harassment against Buddhists are so numerous that they can only be sampled. In 1986, the main dharma hall of Kumsansa Temple was burned to the ground. A man active in a local church confessed to the crime, but the police did not pursue the case because there was "no evidence." The central government quickly rebuilt the structure. The hall is listed as National Treasure No. 476. In 1990, the broadcasting booth of a Buddhist radio station

⁷ He Jiang-ming, "The Modern Chan Society and the China Lutheran Seminary in Conversation: A Case Study of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Contemporary Taiwan," in *Ching Feng* Vol. 4:2 (2003), pp.203-239.

was vandalized. In 1996, five Buddhist temples suffered arson attacks. One of the temples, Hwagyesa, is the home monastery of one of Korea's major Buddhist leaders in interreligious dialogue, Master Seung Sahn. The culprit was widely assumed to be a Christian extremist, although no suspects were identified. Priceless and irreplaceable works of art have been vandalized or stolen. At times, Buddhist temples have been occupied by Evangelicals with the aim of exorcising them of demons. The harassment of monks and nuns is so common that it is not newsworthy.⁸

Buddhists look on Evangelical Christian influence within the government with trepidation. In the 1980s, under the auspices of President Chun Doo-hwan (in office from 1980-1988), restrictive laws were passed interfering with the religious freedom of Buddhists. Temples were forcibly converted to museums or national parks. In 1984, a government textbook identified Buddhism as “a fading religion.” Non-Christians and students in public schools were required to learn biblical passages. In 1996, President Kim Young-sam (in office from 1993-1998) attended a Protestant church service on a military base in which Buddhists and Roman Catholics were required to attend. As a “security measure,” worshipers at a nearby Buddhist temple and a Catholic Church were encircled by troops and held for several hours. The cabinet of President Lee Myung-bak (in office 2008-2013) was made up almost completely of Evangelical Christians. On one occasion, President Lee offered a public prayer that disparaged Buddhism.⁹

There are positive signs in Korea as well. The newly elected president, Park Geun-hye, has not made her Christian faith a public

⁸ Harry L. Wells, “Korean Temple Burnings and Vandalism: The Response of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 20 (2000), pp. 239-240.

⁹ *Korea Yearbook*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2009), pp. 22-24.

issue. She has recently invited representatives of major religious groups to the Blue House for discussions. Arson and vandalism has slowed considerably since 2000. For many years, Dr. Pyon Son-hwan, a Protestant Christian, worked tirelessly in promoting better relations between Christians and Buddhists in Korea. His courageousness is measured by the fact that he was dismissed from his position as president of the Methodist Seminary in Seoul and lost his ministerial privileges in 1992. Cardinal Jung Jin-suk, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Seoul is often invited to speak to gatherings of Buddhists and even to give lectures in Buddhist temples. The Roman Catholic Cathedral in Seoul hosts interfaith meetings on a regular basis. The same is true of several prominent Buddhist temples. Although relations between Catholic Christians and Buddhists are cordial, there was a moment of tension in 1984. The visit of Pope John Paul II was scheduled to coincide, inadvertently or not, with the celebration of the Buddha's birthday. Some Buddhist leaders protested that the timing of the event was "disrespectful" and "in bad taste." This unpleasantness, however, is untypical. Buddhist and Catholic nuns have cooperated on an organ-donation project. The Anglicans and some Protestant churches have active programs promoting theological exchange and cooperation. In addition, the Korean Conference on Religion and Peace brings together representatives of the six major faiths in Korea on a regular basis for consultations and cooperation on joint projects. There are increasingly frequent exchanges between socially engaged Buddhists in Korea and Christian Minjung theologians. Both groups are interested in how religious cooperation can contribute to the common good in society.¹⁰ Most impressively, in 1996, 3000

¹⁰ Minjung means "the people." Minjung movements, Christian but also Buddhist, aim at speaking to the needs of ordinary people. See Pyun Sun Hwan, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Toward the Liberation of the Minjung," in *Dialogue* Vol. 16:1-3 (1999), pp. 59-93.

Protestant, Roman Catholic and Buddhist clergy gathered for the “Religious Leaders’ Pilgrimage for National Reunification.” Eleven cities were visited by this group, making clear that cooperation for peace on the Korean peninsula can overcome sectarian differences.

Sri Lanka

Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka are also troubled, only in this case, the roles have been reversed. Some Buddhists are intolerant of their Christian neighbors. The problem in Korea lies in a Christian theology that excludes Buddhists from salvation. In Sri Lanka, intolerance of Christians is rooted in Buddhism’s connection with nationalism. By no means are all Buddhists in Sri Lanka nationalists. Buddhism, however, has become a symbol of the Sinhala ethnic group, the majority group in the country, and its nationalist ambitions. Nationalists contrast the “true Sri Lanka,” which is Buddhist and Sinhala, with the Tamil ethnic group, which is Hindu. The association of Buddhism with the “true Sri Lanka” also means that Christians have come under unwelcome scrutiny by extremist Buddhist monks in recent decades.

Contemporary tensions reflect a long history of conflict between Christians and Buddhists. The Portuguese, often brutal in their methods, brought Roman Catholic missionaries to Sri Lanka in the 16th century. Temple lands were confiscated and, in some cases, given to the Church. The Dutch, although less violent, reserved higher positions in the colonial government for Sri Lankan Protestants. The British gained complete control over the island in 1815. Christian schools were of great influence on the elites. Like the Dutch, positions of power within the colonial bureaucracy were reserved for Christian converts. British missionaries enjoyed

privileges at the expense of the monks. A Buddhist resurgence began when the Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) called for a reform of Buddhism as a first step toward resisting the humiliation of the Sinhala people under the British. In this way, Buddhism came to be associated with the national hopes of the Sinhala ethnic group. The resurgence of Buddhism has had a major impact on Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka.¹¹

In 2004, a number of Buddhist monks took the controversial step of establishing a political party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, National Sinhala Heritage Party). Part of the background for this move was the death of a prominent monk, the Ven. Gangodawila Soma, in 2003. Allegations were made that fundamentalist Christians were involved with this death. The Ven. Soma had denounced certain NGO's alleging that their social programs were merely a cover for Christian proselytizing. This was certainly the case with some of the NGOs. He also had credited the vices of cigarette smoking and alcohol to Christian influence. A rash of arson on Christian churches broke out after the monk's funeral. Subsequently, the JHU introduced a bill in parliament making "unethical conversion" illegal. Before passage, the bill was challenged in the Supreme Court. Parts of the bill were found to be un-constitutional. Evangelical Christians have taken the matter to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Observers expect the bill to be enacted into law sometime in 2013. Much concern centers over what constitutes an un-ethical conversion. Christian churches run orphanages in Sri Lanka. If an orphan should become a Christian, would the Christians working in the orphanage have broken the law?¹²

¹¹ Lai and von Bruch, *Christianity and Buddhism*, pp. 39-67.

¹² Reshal Serasingha, "Buddhist and Christian View on the Anti-Conversion Bill in Sri Lanka: the Results of a Survey," in *Dialogue* Vol. 32 and 33 (2005-2006), pp. 105-131.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhists and Christians are being pulled apart by two great forces. On the one hand is the modern view of religious belief and affiliation as an individual choice. Christianity is a proselytizing religion whose right to spread its beliefs must be protected by law. Evangelicals do not associate their work with the colonial abuses of the past. Neither do they see how conversions could be destabilizing in a society that no longer has a colonial bureaucracy to hold it together. On the other hand, there is the pre-colonial view of religion as the basis for social order and cultural identity. Buddhist nationalists believe that Buddhism must function as the glue that holds society together now that the island is no longer a British colony. A university student was quoted in a newspaper as saying, “[W]e must rid ourselves of all those who convert (others), priests and pastors who destroy our Buddhist-Sinhalese culture.” In the same news article, a business man noted that “there is no place for many religions, many ethnic groups or many cultures. This is the only purely Buddhist and Sinhalese country in the world.”¹³ These extremist views are not typical of Sri Lankan Buddhists, either monks or laity. In addition, Mainline Protestants, Anglicans and the Catholic Church have remained quiet and, for the most part, Buddhist nationalists have left them alone.

Japan

Somewhat like Taiwan, there are several large Buddhist organizations in Japan whose members look on their faith as an affiliation. Among these organizations are the Risshokoseikai and the Soka Gakkai. In different ways, these groups are interested in building relationships with Christians. Of course, most of the

¹³ Malani Manel Perera, news articles in Asian News dated 30 January 2009. <<http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=14360&size=A>> [2013-04-06].

Christians in Japan look upon their Christian faith as a personally chosen affiliation. The average Japanese person, however, does not look on religion in terms of conversion and entry into a community. This has an impact on both Buddhism and Christianity. For example, Japanese people sometimes come to a Christian church for baptism with no sense of "becoming" a Christian. Often they are looking for a ritual of some sort that will help them with a personal problem. These people have no intention of joining a Christian community after their baptism, yet they often claim to be a "Christian" because of the baptismal ceremony, even though they have little idea of what this might mean. This eclectic approach to rituals applies to weddings as well. For example, many Japanese get married in Christian churches or in hotel banquet rooms by a Christian minister or priest. More often, however, these "Christian weddings" are performed by someone who is not an ordained minister in any Christian denomination. He may not even be a baptized person with a connection to any Christian community. The Roman Catholic Church participates in this practice in a way that is ordinarily not allowed by canon law. A priest can marry a couple, in a church or in a hotel, using the standard Roman Catholic ritual for a wedding complete with scriptural readings, vows and the nuptial blessing. The ceremony, however, has civil status only. There is no religious meaning to the service. Usually, neither the bride nor the groom is baptized persons. "Christian weddings" are stylish and cost far less than a Shinto wedding. In a similar way, the Japanese make use of Buddhist funeral rituals. For an enormous amount of money, a monk, who is usually married, will perform a service for a bereaved family which consists in bestowing a Buddhist name on the deceased and chanting in a Japanese version of Medieval Chinese. Usually even the monk does not understand the meaning of the words. Families sometimes have stone monuments commemorating their dead on the

grounds of Buddhist temples. Thus, most Japanese look on Buddhism and Christianity as businesses which supply rituals when needed. Buddhism supplies funerals. Christianity supplies weddings. Interreligious dialogue and cooperation is of little if any interest to an average Japanese person.

The relationship between Buddhist and Christian organizations are generally good in Japan. This was not always the case. After the arrival of the Jesuits in the 16th century, communication between Buddhists and Christians was hampered by deep misunderstandings due to difficulties of language and the sheer difference between the two religions. Better understanding led to polemics. A persecution of Christians, supervised to an extent by Buddhist monks, began in the 17th century. After Christianity was made legal again in the mid-19th century, tensions remained between Buddhists and Christians until roughly 1895, when the rise of Shinto Nationalism became a threat to both religions.¹⁴

After World War II, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Mainline Protestants have maintained cooperative relations with Buddhist organizations. As in other parts of the world, some Evangelical Christian churches remain an exception to the rule. Conversely, Christian groups tend to be wary of dealings with Soka Gakkai, in part because this Buddhist group has used dialogue with Christians to evangelize. Soka Gakkai has often been described as a cult. Buddhist-Christian cooperation in Japan can be seen in the fact that Cardinal Peter Shirayanagi (1928-2009), as archbishop of Tokyo, served as president of the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations. He was also asked to serve as director of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, an effort largely backed by the Risshokoseikai Buddhist organization. In addition, there are several

¹⁴ Lai and von Bruch, *Christianity and Buddhism*, pp. 104-151.

research centers, sponsored by Mainline Protestant churches, which facilitate interreligious understanding and dialogue with Japanese Buddhists.

Buddhists and Christians have been involved in discussions of one sort of another since the arrival of Francis Xavier in 1549. Two great Japanese thinkers of the 20th century serve to illustrate how difficult it is to attain a mutual understanding, Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) and Shusaku Endo (1923-1996).

Kitaro Nishida began to teach philosophy at the University of Kyoto in 1911. He had an ambitious goal: to develop a philosophy that reflects the cultural traditions of East Asia. Greek philosophy is an underlying presupposition at work in the history of the West. Nishida was searching into the philosophical presuppositions that underlie the East. What makes his work significant for understanding Buddhist-Christian relations in Japan is that he turned to Buddhism, especially Zen, in pursuit of his goal. At the heart of East Asian Civilization, according to Nishida, lies the Buddhist principle of "emptiness." In Buddhist teaching, ultimate reality does not lay beyond this world, as the Greeks taught. Ultimate reality is all of reality here and now, just as it is. There is no Creator-God that lies beyond the created world. Nishida's philosophy has been of great value in clarifying the fundamental differences which separate Buddhism and Christianity. Nishida's successors have had a major impact on academic exchanges between Buddhists and Christians.¹⁵

Shusaku Endo is one of the great novelists of the twentieth century. He was both Japanese and a Roman Catholic Christian and these two facts go to the core of his work as a novelist. He said of

¹⁵ For a general introduction to Nishida's thought and the work of his followers, see James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

himself that his Christian faith hung on him like a ready-made suit of clothes that needed to be altered. Endo was never quite comfortable being Japanese either. He sheds light on the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism in Japan because of his inability to reconcile his Christian faith with his Japanese culture. His greatest novel, *Silence* explores Christianity's inability to set down lasting roots in Japan.¹⁶ The novel takes place during the Tokugawa persecution of Christianity. A Jesuit priest is smuggled into Japan in order to serve the religious needs of the hidden Christians. Eventually he is caught and, in horrifying circumstances, forced to step on an image of Jesus on the cross. In this moment of despair, the priest hears the voice of Christ speaking to him from what can only be called "beyond": Christ speaks from beyond this world and even beyond the priest's own Christian faith. "Trample me," the desecrated image of Christ says to the priest, "for this is why I have come." This great novel should be placed beside the work of Kitaro Nishida. The "emptiness" that lies at the heart of the Buddhist view of reality cannot be reconciled with the "beyond" of the voice of Christ calling out to the priest. In the novel's most quoted passage, Endo likens Japan to a "swamp" that will never sustain the roots of Christian faith. Taken alongside the thought of Nishida, Endo's novel would seem to imply that Christianity and Buddhism can never be reconciled to one another.

Buddhist-Christian Relations Outside of Asia

In understanding Buddhist-Christian relations outside of Asia, we need to recognize that there are two distinct kinds of Buddhist communities to be found there. Immigrant Buddhist communities

¹⁶ Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (London: Peter Owens Publishers, 2007).

consist of immigrants from Asia and their descendants. The second kind of community is made up of converts to Buddhism who are not the descendants of immigrants from Asia. To make things simple, I will refer to these two kinds of communities as "immigrant" and "convert." Referring to the first kind of community as "immigrant" is misleading however. Many of these communities have multiple generations within them. The generation that emigrated from Asia may be long gone. Japanese-American Buddhist communities in North and South America as well as Hawaii, for example, were established over a century ago.

The two kinds of communities keep remarkably separate from one another, although they are certainly not hostile. In part, this is because the communities serve different purposes for their members. The major role of immigrant communities is to preserve cultural continuity with the homeland and generate social capital for their members. Generally speaking, these communities have little interest in monastic practices such as meditation. In contrast, convert communities are more focused on meditation. Almost all convert communities have been founded by Asian teachers. Leadership of these communities has now been passed on to disciples who converted to Buddhism under the direction of the master for the most part. All these factors form a social context for understanding Buddhist-Christian relations outside Asia.

Immigrant Communities

Starting around 1900, Japanese laborers came to Hawaii, the West Coast of the United States and Canada, Peru and Brazil. Buddhist institutions, primarily Pure Land Buddhist organizations, established communities to serve these populations. Eventually other

types of Japanese Buddhist denominations came as well. Often immigrant communities have tried to reformulate their faith to make it more intelligible to Christians. For example, during the Second World War and faced with considerable prejudice, Japanese-American Buddhists adopted the name “Buddhist Churches of America.” School children were taught to say that “Buddha was a God like Jesus” in order to shield themselves from the critical judgment of their Christian classmates. During the War, Japanese-American Buddhists and Christians were interred in camps, away from the West Coast of the United States. In these camps, there was some friction between Buddhists and Christians, but for the most part, ethnicity trumped religious affiliation. Today, there is a good deal of cooperation between Buddhist temples and Christian churches in Japanese-American neighborhoods.¹⁷

In Brazil, Japanese Buddhist immigrant communities get along well with Christians. Religiously speaking, Brazil is exceptionally diverse and tolerant. Buddhists are simply part of a much larger fabric of religions which includes Catholicism, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity as well as Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé. However, Japanese immigrant communities tend to be inward looking and generally untouched by this diversity, although this is beginning to change.

Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities

After the reform of immigration laws in the United States in 1965, Buddhists and Christians from Korea established major communities in Los Angeles, Chicago, and the New York area. The

¹⁷ Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 51–69.

connection between these communities and Korea is, therefore, much stronger than in the older Japanese-American communities. This means that the relationship between Christians and Buddhists in these communities reflects, to an extent, the situation in Korea. In recent years, there have been some examples of harassment of Buddhist monks widely attributed to Evangelicals. The opening ceremony for a major Chinese Buddhist temple in Los Angeles, Hsi Lai temple, was picketed by Korean Christians. Buddhist relations with the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant Christian communities are untroubled. Korean Buddhists have little interest in interreligious dialogue with Christians or with proselytizing.¹⁸

Chinese workers first came to North America in the 19th century. Since the reform of immigration laws in the United States in 1965, major migration of Chinese have come from the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan to the USA, and Australia. Buddhist organizations from Taiwan with interest in fostering dialogue and cooperation with Christians, especially Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan, have established extensive networks in some of these Chinese immigrant communities. Similar to their work in Taiwan, these groups are eager to promote interreligious dialogue and cooperation with Christians. Fo Guang Shan has a major temple complex in the Los Angeles area which regularly hosts Christian groups. The building of this temple was met with years of protest from neighborhood groups and complications with zoning boards. Some of the objections were legitimate (e.g., traffic, etc.) some of the objections were based on ignorance of Buddhism. A coalition of Christian groups joined with Fo Guang Shan and other Buddhist

¹⁸ *Korean Americans and their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, edited by Ho-youn Kwan, Kwang Chung Kim, R. Stephen Warner (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

organizations in the area to lobby successfully for the temple's construction.¹⁹

Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics came to the United States, Canada, Australia and France especially after 1975. During the period of French colonialism, Catholicism enjoyed privileges and Buddhism suffered from discriminatory government policies. In the new immigrant communities, these old tensions have largely been forgotten. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that the openness to other religions called for by the Second Vatican Council has led Catholics to abandon their belief that there is no salvation outside the boundaries of the visible church. Also, subsequent generations of Vietnamese Catholics have grown up in places where there are no “Catholic villages” which keep them separated from Buddhists. Religious diversity is simply a fact of life, to be taken for granted. Interfaith marriages are becoming more common with each new generation born outside of Vietnam. In addition, overseas Vietnamese Buddhists tend to be much more religiously active than their counterparts in Vietnam. Buddhism has become an affiliation for them. Thus, overseas Vietnamese Buddhists organizations are in a better position to cooperate with Catholic organizations in helping victims of natural disasters like the inundation of New Orleans due to hurricane Katrina and various disasters in Vietnam itself. Vietnamese Buddhists and Christians offer a particularly good example of what is called “the dialogue of life.” There is not much theological exchange, but there is much collaboration for the common good and even the informal sharing of faith. This has become the case in Vietnam as well, where French colonial favoritism to Catholics is not a vivid

¹⁹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

memory and both communities have to deal with a communist government.²⁰

Christians eager for interreligious exchanges with members of these Buddhist communities need to be aware of the fact that immigrant communities need to look inward and form tightly knit relationships within their group as a way of coping with the trials of coming to a new country. They are in the difficult process of interpreting the meaning of their faith anew, in an American context. As was the case with Irish and Italian Catholic immigrants to the United States, religious affiliation and observance increases with immigration. They have to cope with inter-generational problems which often have a religious dimension. All this indicates that immigrant Buddhists should not be expected to be particularly interested in interreligious dialogue or cooperation or even capable of such activities, given the enormity of the challenge immigration poses to them.

Convert Buddhist Communities

As remarked above, the social separation of immigrant Buddhist communities from convert communities is striking. With immigrant communities, ethnicity tends to be the governing factor shaping Buddhist-Christian relations. With convert communities, the fact that community members are not born in Asia and not descended from Asian immigrants but rather adult converts to Buddhism is what is of utmost importance.

²⁰ Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka, *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 129-146.

In various parts of the world, many convert communities trace their roots back to Japan in one way or another. Soka Gakkai is a relatively new religious organization in Japan that is now establishing centers in different parts of the world. In a way that is uncharacteristic of almost all forms of Buddhism, Soka Gakkai actively proselytizes. In the United States, the group appeals to African Americans and Hispanics as well as European Americans. Risshokoseikai is another relatively new Japanese Buddhist organization which, like Soka Gakkai, is establishing itself internationally. Both groups are lay Buddhist denominations. Risshokoseikai has a particularly strong emphasis on interreligious cooperation.

There are also multiple Zen Centers throughout the world, including Africa and Oceania. Missionary monks, mostly of Zen lineages from Japan, came to Europe and the United States after World War II. These charismatic founders attracted disciples and established centers for meditation and teaching. The Zen centers are not monasteries in the strict sense. Some of the convert-Buddhists live within the centers, some outside. Attitudes toward Christians stretch across a wide spectrum within these communities. Some converts can be hostile or indifferent to Christianity as the religion they chose to leave behind. Others practice Zen even as they continue to practice their Christian faith and self-identify as Christians. Leaders of these Zen centers have often engaged in interreligious dialogue with Christians.²¹

The Sanbo Kyodan deserves special mention. This is a very small lineage of Zen in Japan, but it has had a disproportionate influence on Christianity in the United States and Germany. The

²¹ Helen Tworkov, *Zen in America: Five Teachers and the Search for an American Buddhism* (Tokyo: Kodansha America, 1994).

Sanbo Kyodan, centered in Kamakura, trained several Catholics who have returned to the West to establish meditation centers of their own. Some of these Catholics are examples of "dual religious belonging" in that they self-identify as both Zen Buddhists and as Catholic Christians. The Catholic students of Zen in Kamakura have moved to the United States and to Europe and founded communities of practice of their own.²²

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

Buddhist-Christian relations developed significantly after the 1960s. The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church had produced *Nostra Aetate*, a "declaration" on its relation to other religions, including Buddhism, which called for interreligious dialogue. The Council also led to the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In addition, the World Council of Churches established its Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies. Both organizations have been pioneering in cultivating relations between Christianity and Buddhism. Often interreligious dialogue is thought of in four different forms: the dialogue of daily life, the dialogue of cooperation for the common good, the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of religious experience (exchanges between monks and nuns in regard to mysticism and prayer).

I have already made observations about the Buddhist-Christian dialogue of life both in Asia and outside of it and need not repeat myself. Around the world, Buddhists and Christians live with one

²² See, for example, the many works of Sanbo Kyodan members such as Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle S.J., Ruben and Maria Habito of the Maria-Kannon Zen Center in Dallas, Texas, Bruce Harris of the Trois Rivières Zen Center in France and Hannelore Muler of the Zendo an der Isar in Germany.

another generally with little difficulty today. As noted, Korea and Sri Lanka can be exceptions to this rule at time. Good relations are almost always the case where Buddhists are the minority and where Christians are the minority as well. The fact that these minorities are almost always tiny is significant in appraising the dialogue of life.

More and more, Buddhists and Christians are involved in the dialogue of cooperation as well. I have already given multiple examples of Buddhists and Christians working together for the common good. In addition, there are increasing exchanges between what are called “engaged Buddhists” and Christians committed to the pursuit of social justice. “Engaged Buddhism” is a term invented by the Vietnamese Buddhist exile Thich Nhat Han who was a critic of both sides during the Vietnamese civil war.²³ In Asia, Christians, like the Jesuit Aloysius Pieris in Sri Lanka, and Buddhists, like Sulak Siveraksa in Thailand, are supporting one another in efforts to address the needs of the poor and the injustices wrecked by the rise of neo-Liberal economics. In Korea, Christians continue to develop Minjung theology (the “people’s theology”) which is rooted in the needs of the poor. Minjung theology has been an impetus in stimulating exchanges between Buddhists and Christians. Exchanges between engaged Buddhists and Christians are frequent in the United States and Europe as well.²⁴

The dialogue of theological exchange is abundant today. There are official, formal dialogues supported by all major Christian organizations, including the World Council of Churches and the Vatican. In the United States, Japan and Europe, this form of dialogue is supported by the Society for Buddhist-Christian

²³ See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (3rd ed.; Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1999).

²⁴ Sally King and Paul O. Ingram *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogues in Honor of Frederick Streng* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999).

Studies.²⁵ The Japanese philosopher of Zen, Masao Abe, spent many years in the United States and Europe articulating the standpoint of Zen by comparing it with Western philosophy and especially Christian belief in God. Abe is the last generation of a line of philosophical thinking that began in Japan with Kitaro Nishida.²⁶ There are multiple centers devoted to the support of exchanges between Buddhists and Christians in Asia. Among many others in Japan, there is the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture and the National Christian Council (NCC) Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, which have sponsored major meetings of Buddhist and Christian thinkers. There are many Christian theologians whose thinking has been shaped significantly by Buddhist thought, including Seiichi Yagi, Ruben Habito, Paul Ingram and myself.

In addition, there is a great deal of the dialogue of religious experience. In 1977, the Catholic Benedictine Order established the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID).²⁷ This organization has been largely devoted to exchanges with Buddhists. In keeping with the monastic tradition (Buddhist and Christian) of hospitality, MID facilitates Buddhist monks living in Catholic monasteries. Methods of prayer and meditation as well as the social responsibility of the contemplative are matters of discussion. In 1996, the Dalai Lama called for a major meeting of Buddhist and Christian monks at Gethsemani Abbey, the monastery of Thomas Merton, whom the Dalai Lama had met decades earlier. Merton was a Catholic monk who must be seen as one of the great pioneers of spiritual exchange between Christians and Buddhists. The themes of this conference included ultimate reality and the spiritual life, prayer and meditation,

²⁵ <www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org/>

²⁶ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

²⁷ <www.monasticdialog.com/>

growth in the spiritual life, community and guidance, spirituality and society.²⁸ In Japan, Rev. Franco Sottocornola, a Catholic, has established Seimeizan, a retreat center with the Ven. Tairyu Furukawa, a Zen Buddhist. William Johnston, a Jesuit who taught for many years in Tokyo, has published multiple books on Christian mysticism in dialogue with Buddhist tradition.

Catholic experimentation with Buddhist meditation practices was the cause of alarm in some circles in the Vatican. In 1989, an office in the Vatican concerned with doctrinal matters published a warning regarding the danger of Catholics losing the Christ-centered character of all Christian prayer.²⁹ This warning had been preceded by a ground-breaking meeting of multiple religions in Assisi in 1986. The meeting was called by Pope John Paul II and included several Buddhists. The purpose of the meeting was to come together to pray for peace. Some Catholics, especially Catholics who have rejected the Second Vatican Council, were outraged over the Assisi meeting. One group even went into schism. The Assisi meeting begs the question of what it means for a Buddhist to “pray” with a Christian. Christian prayer, of course, presumes the existence of God. Buddhists do not “pray” to a transcendent God. Many Christians with extensive experience in this matter think of Buddhist meditation practices as a kind of “gift” to Christians as they practice their own spirituality.

Another source of confusion is the new and increasing phenomenon of “dual religious belonging.” Of course, “belonging”

²⁸ *The Gethsamani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, edited by James Wiseman and Donald Mitchell (NY: Continuum, 1999).

²⁹ “Letter to Catholic Bishops on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” (Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html>).

to more than one religion is the ordinary way of being religious in China, Korea and Japan. As noted above, Chinese people have had little difficulty engaging in Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian practices. This ancient pattern has become more complicated in these areas after the introduction of Christianity. How is it possible to be a Christian and a Buddhist at the same time? Belonging to more than one religion was more or less unheard of in the West until recently. The so-called "new age spirituality" usually aims at dissolving boundaries distinguishing one religion from another. Ironically, this spirituality more often than not involves no religious belonging at all. The spiritual quest, although it may incorporate elements of Christianity, Buddhism and other religions, is strictly individual. More importantly, there is a relatively recent phenomenon associated with Buddhists and Christians who have devoted themselves to interreligious dialogue intently for a sustained period of time. These Christians and Buddhists sometimes report that they have more in common with one another than with certain (usually conservative) members of their home traditions. This double belonging is rarely total. Instead, Christians report that their faith has been deeply transformed by their Buddhist friends and that they hold Buddhist teachings in high esteem. Buddhists report the same. Both remain devoted to one another without fully identifying with the religion of the other. The most radical case of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging is seen by those who self-identify completely as both a Buddhist and as a Christian. There are devout, practicing Catholics, for example, who have embraced Buddhism completely. In my view, this kind of dual belonging cannot be supported theologically. Christian belief recognizes Christ as the unique savior of the world. Christ is the "alpha and the omega," as the Christian Bible affirms. Moreover, Christians pray to the God of Jesus Christ and await the fulfillment of God's plan in the second coming of Christ at the end of

time. Buddhism is a very different religion, at least in terms of doctrine. Perhaps the most sensible approach would be to remain puzzled about how these two religions can be so different doctrinally and so similar in terms of spiritual practices.³⁰

I have noted repeatedly that relations between Buddhists and Christians are generally good everywhere in the world. Sri Lanka and Korea offer exceptions to this rule. But even in these places, relations are so complicated that a great deal of explanation and qualification is required in order to understand relations between Buddhists and Christians correctly. In light of all that has preceded, perhaps the most useful point to be taken is that the “generally good” relations between Buddhists and Christians becomes truly interesting when we take note of all the different kinds of generally good relations there are. Buddhists and Christians get along with one another successfully in different ways in different places in the world. Korea is not Brazil. Los Angeles is not Colombo. The meditation groups in Europe which bring Buddhists and Christians together are not the same as meditation groups in Japan. What is remarkable is that Buddhists and Christians have found so many ways to show not only tolerance, but respect and even deep esteem for one another. They are learning to look on one another’s religion with reverence. Given the many problems interreligious relations pose in the world today, Buddhists and Christians can stand together and give the world something to hope for.

³⁰ Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? A Study of Dual Religious Belonging* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011).

For Further Reading

Cornille, Catherine, ed. *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

Cornille, Catherine and Stephanie Corigliano, eds. *Interreligious Dialogue and Cultural Change*. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2012.

Lai, Pan-chiu. *Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Modern China*. Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2003.

Lai, Whalen and Michael von Bruch. *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of their Dialogue*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

Phan, Peter, ed. *Christianities in Asia*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Prebish, Charles and Kenneth Tanaka. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 129-146.

Thelle, Notto. "The Christian Encounter with Japanese Buddhism." In *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2003: 227-248.

Williams, Duncan Ryuken and Christopher S. Queen, eds. *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999.

[摘要] 儘管佛教與基督教相遇的歷史不短，但之間的嚴肅對話卻只是近代才出現。在二十世紀李提摩太(Timothy Richard)和艾香德(Karl Ludvig Reichelt) 在這促進佛教與基督教間的相互理解做了不少工作。今日，部份福音派基督徒仍敵視佛教為迷信偶像的宗教，在韓國甚至有基督徒攻擊佛教團體，而在斯里蘭卡，佛教徒則敵視以至攻擊基督教團體。儘管如此，大部份時間彼此有著良好的關係，在不同的範疇都有廣泛的對話，及在人道工作上合作。人間佛教與及佛教立正佼成會均十分重視宗教對話，與基督宗教及其他宗教合作，不少基督徒亦贊同他們的主張。在日本，佛教哲學家西田幾多郎與天主教作家遠藤周作展示了佛教與天主教間在世界觀和修道上的差異。在亞洲以外，移民的佛教團體與來自基督教背景的改信佛教的團體間亦有著很大的差異，而他們與基督宗教的關係亦十分不同。不少基督徒亦從佛教的冥想中有所得著，其中有些更自稱同時追隨佛教和基督教的傳統，但作者亦對神學上對這種融合兩教的做法能否達至神學上的一致性表示懷疑。