

# Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions

## Seventh Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, Salzburg, 8-11 June 2007

[by John D'Arcy May](#)

Is it a problem for Buddhists that what is generally regarded as religion can be profoundly different from tradition to tradition? Is it appropriate or even desirable to speak of a Buddhist “theology of religions”? Does Buddhism have its own ways, however subtle, of affirming its superiority over all else that claims the name “religion”? The European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies set out to find answers to these questions at its seventh conference, held at the splendid Catholic conference centre of St Virgil on the outskirts of Salzburg in Austria.

Given the demographic realities in Europe, the Network has inevitably tended to be a group of Christians discussing Buddhism, as far as possible with the participation of Buddhist guests but without really providing a platform for a thoroughgoing Buddhist discussion of religious plurality, such that Buddhism, not Christianity, provides the lens through which to view the religious scene. This time, more Buddhists than ever before, including significant scholars from America and Asia as well as Europe, participated in the conference. We were thus treated to a discussion of Buddhist attitudes to the religions which broke new ground and presented a vivid picture of Buddhism’s own internal diversity as its various Asian incarnations are brought into physical proximity and public confrontation in the plural societies of both Asia and the West.

In his introductory address the President of the Network, Prof. John May, paid tribute to the University of Salzburg’s newly established Centre for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions, whose Director, Prof. Gregor Maria Hoff, welcomed participants on behalf of the university, while Dr Ulrich Winkler contributed substantially to the organisation of the conference. Dr Kristin Kiblinger (Winthrop University), author of the first systematic treatment of Buddhist “inclusivism”, opened the conference proper by distinguishing between “open” and “closed” forms of inclusivism. She suggested a parallel with George Lindbeck’s “experiential-expressive” paradigm of religious doctrine in order to make clear that Buddhists, like Christians, have ways of privileging their own positions, though these generally remain unacknowledged. “One vehicle” (*ekayāna*) theories of Buddhism have something in common with “common core” theories of Christian pluralism in that they presuppose a “single end” inclusivism. Whether the “positionless position” derived from Buddhist “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) is a better guarantee of genuine pluralism than the Christian notion of “self-emptying” (*kenōsis*), as suggested by Masao Abe, remains an open question. The Buddhist doctrine of “two truths”, one expressed in the “higher” language (*paramārtha-satya*) accessible only to Buddhist practitioners and the other in the “lower” language

(*saṃvṛti-satya*) of discourse with others, does not hold out much promise of true mutual respect between traditions.

Prof. John Makransky (Boston College), an ordained Lama and meditation teacher as well as a renowned scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, took up the challenge of developing a Buddhist “theology” which avoids the claim to superiority. What matters to the Buddhist practitioner is to cut through all subconscious clinging, even to approved teachings and spiritual results. “Ultimate truth” can be known, directly but non-conceptually, yielding a “non-conceptual compassion” comparable with what Christians call “totally undivided oneness with God”. Lacking historical consciousness, however, teachers have tended to project their understanding of skilful means back on to Śākyamuni Buddha, each school assuming that other schools are merely preparations for itself. The same pattern is evident in the integration into Buddhism of indigenous religions such as Shintō, which enriched Buddhism but also assimilated it to themselves. Prompted by his contacts with Christian colleagues to venture beyond practice into Buddhist self-reflection, Makransky is now prepared to see in conceptions such as the *Dharmakāya* (“Dharma body” of the Buddha or ultimate reality) an equivalent of what Christians understand by God. The Body of Christ, with its implications for ecclesiology, could open up a further avenue for comparison.

Existing under the conditions of late or post-modernity, Buddhism is forced to come to terms with pluralism and ecumenism. Prof. Kenneth Tanaka (Musashino University, Tokyo), an ordained Jōdo Shinshū priest, sees himself as incapable of saying to a non-Buddhist, “You’re not saved”, because the practice of *prajñā* and *karuṇā* (wisdom and compassion) is not restricted to Buddhists. Even within traditions, however, spiritual attainment is not equivalent, nor are all religions equally valid. “Prophets can’t be pluralists”, but like Shinran they can be mindful that all religious language is relative and we are saved by “other power” (*tariki*) as well as by our “own power” (*jiriki*). Prof. Peter Harvey (University of Sunderland, UK), a practicing Theravāda Buddhist, gave a detailed account of the objections of what eventually came to be called the Theravāda to the Mahāyāna, notwithstanding the more recent co-operation of both in the ordination of *bhikkhunī* (nuns) and the renowned Thai monk Buddhadasa’s engagement with the Dalai Lama, who has always tried to transcend sectarianism. Northern Buddhism was mediated by China, where each school classified the parent Indian systems in such a way as to demonstrate its own superiority. All should remember that they take refuge, not in the various *yānas*, but in the Buddha.

There followed a day of astonishing discoveries as Buddhism’s relations with some of the other major religions were explored. Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (University of Glasgow) reviewed the ways in which Buddhism has lent itself to violent conflict and polemics, from the “Buddhist-Tamil wars” of Sri Lanka to Ambedkar’s opposition to Hinduism; from the anti-Vedic polemics of the early Buddhists to Buddhism’s virtual excommunication by Hinduism. By a sort of “reciprocal inclusivism”, Hindu deities and practices were integrated into both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, while Hindus interpreted the Buddha as an *avatāra* (“descent” or incarnation) of Viṣṇu, sent to deceive the unwary. Such polemics rarely led to outright persecution, however, and in modern times the Buddhist Dharmapala and the

Hindu Vivekananda found more benign ways of interpreting the “other” tradition. Today, both religions need to draw closer together as they come to terms with their powerful rivals, Islam and Christianity.

Dr Alexander Berzin (Berlin), an internationally known lecturer on and translator of Tibetan Buddhism, unfolded the little-known story of 1,300 years of Buddhist relations with Islam. Whereas Muslims generally tried to interpret Buddhism in Muslim terms, Buddhists showed no interest in Islam whatever unless forced to do so by political expediency. Better mutual understanding is now becoming urgent in such contexts as southern Thailand and Indonesia, where a “Buddhist-Muslim ethic for Southeast Asia” is needed, and the Dalai Lama has shown an interest in Sufism. Treating the better known area of Buddhist-Christian relations, Prof. Andreas Grünschloss (University of Göttingen) reminded us how exclusivist some of the pioneers of Western Buddhism, such as Grimm and Dahlke, had been, a tendency that continues in their modern successors such as Mumonkai. Such hybrids as “Christian Zen” are as unacceptable to these Buddhists as the Buddhist interpretations of Christianity by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama or Ken Leong are to many Christians. When converts to Buddhism such as Ayya Khema re-read the Sermon on the Mount or I Corinthians 13 with Buddhist eyes, the texts appear spiritualised and de-contextualised.

An especially fascinating presentation was that of Prof. Nathan Katz (Florida International University) on Buddhist relations with Judaism. There are ancient linguistic traces of links between India and Israel, and in modern times mutual attitudes have been ambivalent: Martin Buber relished the East, whereas Franz Rosenzweig resisted it, and Gerschom Scholem admonished his fellow-Jew, the future Ayya Khema, that “Jewish mysticism is not for women”, whereupon she found her way to Buddhism while remaining Jewish – “What else?” In Asia, where there have been substantial Jewish communities, Jews were used by Rama VI of Thailand to make coded references to the Chinese as a “parasitic commercial class”, while Christian missionaries saw the “bloodsucking” Brahmins as they had been taught to see Jews. Katz’s account a dialogue between representative Jewish scholars and Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala showed how difficult mutual understanding can be, yet when Ven. Geshe Lobsang Tenzin was asked how Jews could best help the Tibetans he replied: “Just be who you are, just be Jews ... The fact that you are still here, the fact that you still worship in your way – this means more to us than anything you could possibly do”. “Just like that”, Katz concluded, “Geshe-la revealed our own wisdom to us”.

Prof. Paul Knitter (Union Theological Seminary, New York) was given the daunting task of outlining a comparison between Buddhist and Christian attitudes. He began by asking whether the diversity of religions is seen as a problem or a blessing in the two traditions. For the popes, religious pluralism is the case *de facto* but not *de jure*, while Buddhist thinkers such as Rita Gross are more likely to ask, “What’s the problem?” Whereas theologians have an urge to seek unity, for Buddhists diversity is normal, even ontological. Do the religions have anything in common? (not an expression Buddhists would use). “Identist pluralists” answer Yes, “deep pluralists” say No. Buddhists negate incommensurable differences among religions, believing that we are not imprisoned in the particularity of language; Christians

differ according to the ways they understand the Trinitarian nature of God. Contradictory answers are also given to the question of superiority. Each of these answers has to be constructed, not excavated from the traditions, because pluralism is a specifically modern idea. Buddhist theologians, however, have the resources to move beyond the exclusivism and inclusivism that have marked Buddhist history. Although the Dharmakāya is inexpressible, statements of universal truth can be made, a stance that invites dialogue. This need not mean relativism; there is good and bad religion, and each tradition has criteria for identifying its ethical fruits. Despite stark differences, Buddhists and Christians have much to learn from one another. “Buddhists remind Christians what they already attest but all too often forget: that the God revealed by Jesus as ‘greater than I’ (mysterious) and ‘still to come’ (eschatological) cannot therefore be limited to Jesus. Christians challenge Buddhists to take history and historical particularities more seriously. ... Every historical form may be utterly *empty*. But Emptiness *is* each Form, in all its historical particularity”.

In a moving response to this paper, David Brazier, the head of the Pure Land movement in Britain, began: “Amida wants to save all, speaks to all in their language; yet I don’t know his name!” None of us knows what we would do given certain circumstances, nor what real faith is: “What if it’s *not* so?” We are always trying to appropriate the other, to recruit Buddhism and Christianity for “eco-humanism”. Dr Elizabeth Harris (Liverpool Hope University), who has studied the Theravāda extensively in Sri Lanka, said that we can only use our own tools to explore each other’s traditions – Christians, for example, could make more use of the ministry of Jesus as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels – but we will never really enter into the other’s viewpoint unless we let go of our conditioning. If we do so, we can draw deeply from others’ wells, as she has been privileged to do.

In the mid-twentieth century Christianity went through a process of “demythologising”; one preliminary outcome of this conference is that there is scope for deconstructing familiar myths about Buddhism’s tolerance of and openness to its “others”. As David Brazier put it, “our dialogue must be grounded in our failures”. The conference offered a growing number of younger scholars the opportunity to present their research projects, which bodes well for the future of Buddhist-Christian studies in Europe. The next conference of the Network will be in the Benedictine Archabbey of St Ottilien, near Munich, 12-15 June 2009, tentatively on the topic “Sources of Authority and Truth in Buddhism and Christianity”. At this conference it is hoped that ties with our American counterpart, the Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies, will be further strengthened as we plan for a joint European-American conference and closer trans-Atlantic ties in the future. In the meantime, a whole new field of Christian *and* Buddhist “theology of religions” has been opened up.