

Buddhists and Christians in Holland: A Historic Encounter

It was supposed to be a unique meeting, the kind that has not frequently (or ever?) been available in Holland or on the Continent. Intended to be both academic and experiential, it would call on the services of internationally known scholars but in a context and format that would open their discussions to the concerns of non-academicians who are exploring a Buddhist-Christian encounter in their own personal or professional lives. Such were the hopes of the organizers of the "International Conference on Buddhism-Christianity" held at De Tiltenberg in Holland, June 17–19, 1988. Under the leadership of Ms. M. E. Maréchal, the staff at De Tiltenberg (which is a conference center of the international women's movement known as The Grail) has over the past years been offering study and meditation courses on Zen for both Dutch and English speaking participants. This international conference was the fruit of those efforts. Organized by Ms. Maréchal and by Professor M. A. Lathouwers (Catholic University, Louvain) and N. Tydeman (Netherlands Center of Buddhist Studies), the conference attracted 85 participants, both academicians and laity, mostly from Holland but also from England, Germany, Belgium, and France.

Among the four resource persons, Masao Abe (Visiting Professor at the Pacific School of Religion) and Hans Waldenfels (University of Bonn) provided the focus of the discussions. Jan van Bragt (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture) introduced the content and challenge of the Kyoto School and then served as Chair of the conference, while Paul Knitter (Xavier University, Cincinnati) offered both a general introduction on "new theological perspectives for Buddhist-Christian dialogue" and summary reflections at the concluding Buddhist-Christian liturgy.

After van Bragt's and Knitter's introductions, there were three main sessions on suffering, religious experience (faith and enlightenment), and ethical/social responsibility. Each session began with a lecture by Professor Abe, thus indicating that although the conference clearly wanted to foster a give and take between Christians and Buddhists, the first step was for Christians/Westerners to listen to Buddhists/Easterners. After each lecture, Professor Waldenfels offered a commentary in which he clearly showed that he not only listened carefully, but that he also had a few Christian challenges for the Buddhists. The final part of each session began with the reading of questions submitted by the audience, followed by an always vigorous discussion from the floor which usually carried over into mealtimes and coffee breaks. Balancing and informing the discussions were opportunities for praxis: every morning there was both zazen (led by Professor Abe) and a Christian liturgy.

In the wide-ranging discussion, two recurrent themes emerged. The first revolved around attempts to unpack a statement made by van Bragt in his opening remarks—that Buddhism, especially in the Kyoto School, was a threat

not so much to “God” as to “theism.” Abe delivered the threat, insisting that the Buddhist experience and notion of Emptiness does not allow for an independent or self-sustaining God outside the ultimacy of interdependency. For Christians, God can exist without the world; for Zen Buddhists, that would be impossible. Waldenfels responded with the suggestion that perhaps Abe is caught in an overly conceptual analysis of the problem of God vs. Emptiness and needs to be more experiential. (At which point, Abe smiled!) In the experience of both God and Emptiness, in Waldenfels’ view, there is the sense of radical unity and interrelatedness. Here both notions merge. If in this merging, the God of theism disappears, what kind of God remains? That question was not resolved.

Surfacing even more frequently and sharply in all three sessions was the question not so much of ethics but of social responsibility: why, how, to what purpose is one to be involved in transforming this world. To Abe’s announcement that Buddhists direct all their energies and hopes to the removal of suffering, Waldenfels asked whether these energies are so focused on the singular Suffering of humankind that the multiple sufferings of concrete people are missed. He recalled the Tibetan monk who suggested that the Christian notion of suffering is superficial; for the monk, physical sufferings are not the *real* (ontological?) problem. In light of this idea, Waldenfels pressed his question: “What have Buddhists done *concretely* with Compassion?”

Trying to rescue the Tibetan monk, Abe responded that for Buddhists there is always a horizontal (wisdom/*prajñā*) and a vertical (compassion/*karuṇā*) dimension to the problem of suffering. To resolve human suffering, both dimensions must be involved. He admitted that although his teacher Hisamatsu had always insisted that compassion cannot be limited to bringing others to Enlightenment but must seek to change social structures, Buddhism had not always seen or lived this link between compassion and the world of economic-social realities. Pointing out that both Buddhism and Christianity stress the centrality of compassion, Abe also recognized that while Buddhists stress the nonduality of compassion and wisdom, Christians stress the nonduality of compassion and justice. Here the weakness of each can be addressed by the strength of the other.

Knitter wanted to explore Abe’s notion of the nonduality between wisdom and compassion. He asked whether Abe could agree with the insistence of some Christian liberation theologians that the praxis of justice (the option for the oppressed) is not just something that flows from the wisdom born of Enlightenment but is itself a form of Enlightenment (of religious experience)—so much so that in the very action/experience of struggling for justice one experiences or “sees” aspects of the Ultimate/God that otherwise one would not see or understand. Wisdom (knowing God) is realized *in*—not outside of—the praxis of compassion and justice. Abe replied that he could affirm the praxis of justice and liberation as a “condition” or “occasion” for experiencing God/Enlightenment but not as a “ground” or “source” of Enlightenment. “Our action for

justice expands, but does not cause our experience of God. Our experience of God must come from God's Self." (Here Abe was accommodating to Christian terminology.) In the end, it seemed that in this discussion between Abe and Knitter, the traditional tables were turned: Abe was indirectly warning Knitter of *reducing* God to the praxis of liberation and Knitter was suggesting that Abe might be dualistically separating the praxis of justice/compassion from the reality of God/Ultimate.

In the concluding liturgy—which included reflections on a Christian text by a Buddhist and on a Buddhist text by a Christian, as well as chants from the Russian liturgy and from the *Heart Sutra*—the irreducible differences between Buddhism and Christianity were recognized and celebrated. Only by first affirming and embracing the genuine, sometimes frightening, differences of the other can we avoid reducing the other to ourselves; only then can the differences become for us new possibilities of seeing and acting.

The success of the conference was reflected in the resolve to do it again. The De Teltenberg staff will be organizing further Buddhist-Christian meetings in the future.

Paul Knitter
Xavier University

Naropa Institute's Seventh Conference on Buddhist and Christian Meditation: "Theism and Nontheism"

The Naropa Institute held the seventh in its series of dialogues on Buddhist and Christian meditation in Boulder, Colorado, July 27–31, 1988. This series of conferences grew out of conversations in 1968 between Thomas Merton and the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. The purpose of the ongoing dialogue has been the exploration of the common experience of contemplative Christians and Buddhists living in a largely non-contemplative contemporary society.

This conference, dedicated to the memory of Trungpa Rinpoche, who died in April of 1987, was entitled "Theism and Nontheism." Discussions among the faculty revolved around a series of afternoon roundtables on three themes: 1) the contemplative's experience of ultimate reality; 2) its appropriate expression in liturgical celebration, dialogue and discussion; and 3) compassionate or loving action in the world.

The power of these discussions stemmed largely from the maturity of the dialogue and the high quality of the distinguished faculty. From the Christian side, the faculty included Brother David Steindl-Rast (Benedictine), Mother Tessa Bielecki (Carmelite), Father Robert Arida (Orthodox), and Dr. James Finley (lay Catholic). The Buddhist faculty were Loppon Lodro Dorje (Tibetan Buddhist), Dr. Sylvia Boorstein (Theravada), Ven. Dainin Katagiri Roshi (Soto