

Response Article 4: The Perspective of a Protestant Scholar

Reflections on Celibacy – and Dialogue More Broadly

By Robert Hunt

This paper, although not fully related to inter-religious dialogue, provides in its brief discussion of celibacy in the Theravada Buddhist tradition a helpful reminder of some essential questions to the very task of inter-religious engagement.

The first of these emerges in historicizing of the practice of celibacy in the Roman Catholic tradition, so that the reader understands how justifications and uses of the practice changed in different cultural and social settings even as the Roman Catholic church sought to highlight a consistent rationale for priestly celibacy in the larger framework of human sexuality in relation to spiritual goals. Too often in interfaith dialogue a practice such as celibacy is treated, by all parties, as a uniform practice with a consistent purpose and rationale over the length of the tradition. Historicizing traditions complicates dialogue, but may lead to a more realistic assessment of similarity and difference between traditions that appear at any given moment to be either highly divergent or nearly synchronic.

It is likewise useful to note that despite changes over time celibacy in the Roman Catholic tradition has been seen as a sexual practice, and thus remains linked to Roman Catholic ideas about sexuality and theological anthropology more generally. Understanding this helps highlight the underlying differences between the practice of celibacy in the Roman Catholic and Theravada traditions, and presumably other religious traditions as well. In contrast to Roman Catholicism, in Theravada Buddhism celibacy is not so much a sexual practice as a denial of the significance of sexuality, and indeed all illusory human distinctions.

Unfortunately not mentioned explicitly in this paper, but apparent in its account of both Roman Catholic and Theravada celibacy, is the relation of sublimation of human drives and its unspoken compliment, the domination of those perceived to enliven or increase those drives. More specifically this emerges in the domination of women, since apparently both Roman Catholicism and Buddhism see female sexual desire as somehow less quickened by the physical presence of men than the reverse. This then raises the further question of the extent to which the understandings of sexuality that lead to the practice of celibacy are rooted in theological reflection within these different traditions, or are borrowed from a deeper patriarchal cultural heritage, and indeed whether this distinction between theological reflection and culture is possible.

Given the admonition in the Christian New Testament, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church . . .” (Ephesians 6:22-23 in the Christian New

Testament) the Christian practice of celibacy as a sexual practice as well as marriage as sexual practice seems to be rooted in conceptions of hierarchy and patterns of dominance that extend beyond the human realm to the divine. If this is the case then it is rooted in a somewhat different ontology than that of Theravada Buddhism which recognizes neither divinity nor hierarchy as ultimately real.

The paper ends with a rather positive assessment of the recent changes in Roman Catholic understandings of sexuality, changes that refine the understanding of the relationship between celibacy before marriage, celibacy as part of a distinctly monastic vocation, and celibacy in the priesthood. Of course whether these changes adequately address the problems of earlier doctrine is another matter. And while this respondent has heard a paper by Maria Reis Habito suggesting that some re-evaluation of Buddhist understandings of sexuality and celibacy is necessary to overcome apparent misogyny in the Buddhist tradition (in the setting of Buddhist Muslim dialogue), and knows of the work of Rita Gross in this regard, this does not appear to be a common topic of Buddhist Christian dialogue. Certainly not to the extent that environmental concerns and broader issues related to poverty and human justice come frequently to the fore in such dialogue. This begs then one of the most troubling questions for those engaged in inter-religious dialogue. At what point does dialogue move beyond seeking to understand and be understood toward seeking an agreement on matters of shared concern, such as for example human rights in relation to sexuality, and then an insistence on plumbing together the religious depths from which injustice may be emerging? Practice, however apparently benign, may be an indicator of a theology/ontology/philosophy less than perfect for human flourishing.