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30 April 2011

We are pleased to share with you our sixth issue, once again brimming with new perspectives. The voices we feature in this issue are singular, and offer striking ideas about interfaith work from around the globe.

Nathan Iddrisu Samwini shares important (and often under-reported in the United States) inter-religious dialogue from West Africa in his article, “The Need for and Importance of Dialogue of Life in Community Building: The Case of Selected West African Nations.”

In “Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel: A 21st Century Imperative,” Denise Yarbrough highlights how ministers might—and should—approach the challenge of an increasingly pluralistic world from the pulpit. We often hear from clergy members about this issue, and are pleased to offer a perspective that can add to this conversation.

DeWitt Clinton makes an unprecedented connection between the personal and political in “Sitting at the Buddha with the Tanna’im: Walking Through the *Dhammapada* and *Pirke Avot*.”

Finally, in “Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue in Ladakh, 2010,” Maria Reis Habito reports on a conference in which participants began a sustaining dialogue leading to an embrace of the challenges in Buddhist-Muslim dialogue.

With our sixth issue, we continue to foster a movement that grows. We hear from readers and collaborators around the world who are changing their communities and building relationships that will bear fruit for years to come.

We thank the writers of this issue for helping us further our mission, and welcome your comments and submissions now and in the future.

In the spirit of continued dialogue,

Stephanie Varnon-Hughes and Joshua M. Z. Stanton
Founding Editors in Chief

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The Need for and Importance of Dialogue of Life in Community Building: The Case of Selected West African Nations

By Nathan Iddrisu Samwini

Abstract

This paper discusses dialogue of life under five main thematic areas. After a definition of dialogue of life the paper goes on to discuss dialogue of life in general, the need for dialogue of life, the effects of dialogue of life, and the importance of dialogue of life in community and nation building, with particular emphasis on selected West African and Nations.¹

Introduction

There has been a revolution in the presence of religion in many local African communities and nations as a whole in the last one hundred years or so. Within the period, various religions have come to live in closer proximity with one another than they had during the previous century. African towns and cities now collaborate with churches and mosques and to a lesser extent traditional/primal religious activities. Subsequently, at the present time, people of different faiths encounter one another more often in both structured and unstructured ways. For example, in many homes across Ghana and the Gambia, it is common to find followers of African indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam with all the different groups of Christianity and Islam living together. By extension such relations are carried to the larger village or town community. During child-naming, funeral celebration and weddings for example, religious people of these varied faiths attend these ceremonies of one another without the question of religious affiliation. The main consideration is to share in the joy of either a neighbor's childbirth or weeding or to share in the pain of the loss of a relative or a loved one. People of different faiths are also found together in such places as government establishments, educational institutions, business agencies, and at sporting activities. In these countries jobs and other public roles are open to all qualified persons irrespective of religious affiliation. It is common, for instance, to find a Catholic heading a Protestant institution and vice versa. In the same way Muslims head Christian institutions and vice-versa. The Ghana national sporting teams have Muslims and Christians in them and reports have it that, when they pray together and on the field, one can hardly tell who is a Muslim and who is not. The same scenario applies to the Gambia and other West African countries.

If religious people must find a way to live together in the same homes, small villages, or town communities and work or study together in other structured and unstructured ways, then dialogue of life is inevitably necessary in order to bring about total social cohesion for community and nation building. Community should be understood in this paper to stand for two things: Christian communities and Muslim communities (*umma*) as separate bodies and the local community, which comprises all the religious communities together.

In what follows I hope to show how Christians and Muslims have practically demonstrated the reality of dialogue of life in Ghana and the Gambia. Additionally the paper hopes to show how the failure of Niger and Nigeria to adopt similar positions has negatively affected the two nations and plunged them into constant communal violence. The paper looks at the need for dialogue of life across West Africa, the effects of dialogue of life (particularly in Ghana and the Gambia), and the importance of dialogue of life in nation or community building.

Defining Dialogue of Life

Dialogue of life in simple terms entails coexisting peacefully with "the other" in spite of obvious religious differences. It also means being patient. In dialogue of life, people from different religious traditions live and interact in their everyday lives. Dialogue of life is a direct challenge to religious people, non-religious individuals, towns, and communities to accept one another no matter their differences in beliefs or practices. It differs from inter-religious dialogue, which often involves listening to one another about the content of each other's faiths. Dialogue of life instead entails faith communities and individuals "sharing with openness" what God is doing in the life of his people (Sam, 2009, 25). Dialogue of life, by virtue of primarily basing relations on blood or social ties, can lead to the dispelling of prejudice and engender mutual understanding. Dialogue of life is a means to challenge adherents of living faiths—such as Buddhists, Christians and Muslims—to rise up and in witness to each other about what they believe and also to help each other to gain their dignity without oppression. This mutual enrichment is vital for

¹ In April 2010, I had the opportunity to address thirty-five priests of six Dioceses of the Catholic Church meeting to mark the occasion of the year of the priest at Offoase Kokoben in the Obuasi Diocese of the Church. This paper contains slight additions to the original paper delivered on the occasion. The original paper was limited to the situation in Ghana.

community development and peaceful co-existence. Douglas Sturm suggests that inter-religious dialogue is primarily concerned with answering the question, “How do we live our lives together?” (Sturm, 1993, 2) Whereas formal dialogue consultations range from perspectives and attempts at answering the above question to assumptions that finding bridges between religious differences will facilitate answers, dialogue of life is ‘the already negotiated answer.”

Unlike inter-religious dialogue which seeks, among other things to build understanding on similarities between the different faiths, dialogue of life does not necessarily look for similarities but seeks to bring peace even amidst acknowledged differences. The process thereby generates peaceful co-existence and enables people to promote spiritual and cultural values, which are found in the distinct outlooks of followers of the other religions. Peaceful co-existence leads to a growth in relationship through a process of mutuality that generates greater understanding and mutual enrichment. The end result is better relations between religions within the same community.

Dialogue of life is a form of “mission”. It is not “evangelism” or *da’wa* (call to Islam). Evangelism and *da’wa* intend to bring outsiders to the faith of Christianity or of Islam. Dialogue of life creates an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. This is not because of any desire to do away with the Christian and Islamic responsibility to call outsiders to their faiths but for them to explore other ways to make plain the intentions of Christian and Muslim witness and service. These approaches have worked remarkably well in Ghana and the Gambia, and the results are that the two countries have not had any serious cases of religious conflicts.

The Need for Dialogue of Life

Given the definition of dialogue of life, it is clear that followers of different religious traditions are exposed to the practical daily living of their religious counterparts within the same community. They experience one another as real people and learn more about their neighbors. This humanization fosters mutual respect. In fact, in a dialogue of life context, religious relations are not planned or formal; rather, they are a natural outgrowth of the daily encounter with the other. In the home, small village, or town communities where dialogue of life is practiced, people relate first as blood relatives and not as religious communities. Religion takes a less important position.

Dialogue of life does not necessitate dilution of beliefs into some vague, universal whole. Through dialogue of life, religious people reflect on how they can be communities and witnesses of service to themselves, to one another, and to the wider community without compromising their commitments to God. In this pluralistic environment, religious practitioners find themselves confronted by three main challenges of intellectual, moral, and theological character that create the need for dialogue of life. Before discussing the need for dialogue, let me briefly discuss these challenges.

Firstly, at the intellectual level, religious pluralism poses a great challenge to the human mind (Dickson, 2001, 13). Do the religious presuppositions of one religion explain all religions? Or should the mind be challenged by the variety of religions to try to make sense of the multiplicity of religious phenomena? Dickson asserts that it is only “the lazy mind that makes facile judgments, concluding that religions other than one’s own have nothing to teach humankind” (Dickson, 2001, 13). There are always new things to learn from other religious paradigms, and they can be learned through constructive daily interactions and open-minded relationships with the other. For example, there is much to be learned from the Muslim practice of prayer and the indigenous African religionist’s pacifism.

Secondly, there is a moral challenge. Perhaps more than any other time in history, the world has a strong desire for peace and cohesion. At the international level, the United Nations and its agencies are working hard towards the realization of such socioeconomic and political conditions as would make the world a happier and more equitable place. Regional and sub-regional economic and political groupings serve the same purpose. Given this yearning for peace and attempts to dismantle all unwanted barriers, there is the need to ensure that religious pluralism does not prevent the development of loyalties across frontiers. Religion should instead facilitate such loyalties through dialogue of life. People of faith living harmoniously together without holding back their common human struggles can lead to openness, which can break down mental and social barriers. In the case of homogenous populations the people should already be bound by their commonality of origin or ancestry.

Thirdly, there is the theological challenge. It used to be argued (and still is in some circles) on theological grounds that those who do not belong to one’s religion are doomed. Years ago the Swiss theologian Hans Kung took issue with those who held the view that ‘outside the church there is no salvation.’ Kung wondered whether those born before Christ were doomed through no fault of their own. Although dialogue of life does not entirely eliminate exclusivist religious tendencies, it reduces them through long-term interaction and engagements of the religious people in dealing with life’s daily challenges. There are many religious, social, political,

and economic challenges that confront humanity today that call for the collaborative efforts of every person and group, which must be confronted collectively.

Added to the above challenges, we may say that there are several reasons for the need for dialogue of life, particularly in the West African context. Such reasons can be placed in both historical and contemporary contexts. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1979, 716-727) referred to our era as one of Christian self-understanding. Coming after Vatican II Council, this statement implies two things. The first is that the Church, having come to acknowledge the importance of 'mutual understanding' between it and other faiths, suddenly has arrived at a position of self-understanding. The second is that Christianity should understand that it is no longer the only religion. It has competitors and in some cases collaborators across the globe, so it must learn to cooperate and collaborate. David Krieger provides a clue to the locus of this process when he writes about "internal interreligious dialogue and external internal interreligious dialogue" (1993, 331-353). Krieger does not, however, give details as to how this rather speculative approach can lead to the desired need for peace and peaceful cohabitation.

Among other things, the most significant conclusions of Vatican II were: its recognition of the *ecclesia particularis* or local church; the movement towards conciliation with the Eastern Church; the incorporation of vernacular into the liturgical life; the declaration on religious freedom, respecting the dignity of other religious beliefs; and the affirmation of other religions (Dadosky 2010, 10). The council is unsurpassed in invoking "the language of mutuality in terms of the church's outward (ad extra) relations" (Dadosky 2010, 10). Other pertinent documents from the council include the decree on Ecumenism and the declaration on non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate). Dadosky details how the church can enrich the individual and society and how on the other hand the church is enriched by the other.

The Nostra Aetate repeats the Church's call for "mutual understanding" and respect in the dialogue between religions. It goes on to say, "A renewal of the Church's consciousness of itself and of its mission could not help but lead to a reevaluation of its relationship with those who do not profess faith in Jesus" (Trouvé 1999, 389). In expounding on this understanding, the Church holds that men expect from various religions answers to the unresolved riddles of human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men. Pope Paul VI wrote in support of this position saying, "wherever men are trying to understand themselves, and the world, we can communicate with them" (Trouvé 1999, 390). Summarizing the document and its demands on the Church the Catholic Archbishop of Tamale states that the document exhorts the church to undertake activities that would promote dialogue for peace, justice, development, and reconciliation (Kpiebaya 1999, 12).

According to the World Council of Churches in this age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation, religions and ideologies have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in mutual dialogue (WCC 1979, 1). It is the responsibility of "Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted by Jesus Christ."

In West Africa, as in all parts of the world, humans are born into relationships with other people. Immediately they have to relate with members of their families, but quickly as they grow up they have to explore wider relationships as they attend school or go to work. This often takes place within the complexity of relationships in a village community or the modern urban centers of the sub-region, which keep attracting immigrant populations. People experience still wider associations within the nation, the ethnic group, and at the same time they may belong to different religions, which condition their outlooks. With globalization comes easy access to local and foreign newspapers, radio and television programs, and the Internet. All these together give people an awareness of the multitude of ways in which the lives they live are influenced and at the same time challenged to depend on people from worlds other than their own.

Again West Africa stands out as a sub region with many challenges and opportunities. The region faces the challenge of pluralism. Different ethnic groups were organized as loose modern nation states of previously self-governing kingdoms, states, and religious traditions. Some of these ethnic groups only came together under one and the same authority either during the colonial period or at independence. The heterogenous nature of the sub region forces it to confront the challenge of struggling to bring all the diverse groups to one whole community within the respective countries. For example, it is estimated that Nigeria has 250 different ethnic groups and a total population of 149,229,090 (www.infoplease.com/pa/A0107847/html and www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-worldfactbook/geos/ni.html). Date of retrieval 24/4/10).

The religious breakdown according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) webpage is made up of 50% Muslims, 40% Christians and 10% indigenous religions. Nigeria's failure to exploit its ethnic and religious diversity for national cohesion has for a long time resulted in occasional communal violence. Dialogue of life in the sense as discussed in this paper does not seem possible in many Nigerian communities. Instead of using the gifts and graces of diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country for unity and development, people of Nigeria rather emphasize their ethnic and religious particularities.

Ghana, a country covering an area of 238,500 square kilometers, has an estimated population of 22 million, drawn from more than 100 ethnic groups—each with its own unique language. Similar stories could be told of all the nation states of the sub region. The sub region therefore has the great challenge of arriving at the full unity of the people, hence the prevalence of inter-ethnic conflicts that sometimes implicate religion. The complex situation in Northern Nigeria is a prime example, where even though many conflicts are based in ethnic or politico-economic issues, they easily take on religious dimensions. Our intention here is not to contest the accuracy of the figures but to portray the need for and likely positive effects of dialogue of life among these varied groups of people.

Another challenge that confronts West Africa, which reinforces the need for dialogue of life, is within communities and among ethnic groups. These conflicts are caused by a complex combination of poverty, deprivation, deliberate politics of marginalization, political manipulations, and lack of development for many local communities. In Ghana, the perennial case of Bawku stands out for its political failure in solving communal violence. The same can be said of Northern Nigeria and the Niger Delta region, where a complex mixture of religion, ethnocentrism, economic dominance, political undercurrents, and economic exploitation have caused long-term communal violence. The conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone of the 1990s are all challenges of unrest that require collaborative efforts to tackle.

A news release 10/53 on the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) webpage of April 6, 2010 painted a very grim picture on the refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) situation in Niger and Mali. The ICRC then reported that it needed emergency relief "to assist over 100,000 persons affected by adverse weather conditions and violence." A Report by Zaid Abu Laban and Saadatou M. Barmou to the International Committee of the Red Cross went further to state that,

"Although fighting between government forces and armed opposition groups in northern Niger and Mali subsided last year (2009), areas such as Ansongo in Mali and Tillabéry in Niger experienced an upturn in communal violence, forcing thousands of people to temporarily leave their homes. 'We will not only help internally displaced people who lost all their belongings but also vulnerable residents and returnees, since they too have been hard hit by the crisis'"

(www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteengo.nsf/html/mali-niger-news-06041).

One may be right in suggesting that because people of local African communities are drifting away from the traditional African communal life to pseudo-religious communal systems, the spirit of harmony is gradually being lost.

From the above information, we may deduce that dialogue of life is needed for four reasons. Firstly, the church as the body of Christ as we noted above has, since Vatican II Council come to the point of self realization on the need to acknowledge the importance of 'mutual understanding' between it and other faiths, thus calling on Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted by Jesus Christ.

Secondly, is the fact that even non-religious international and sub regional bodies like the United Nations and their agencies are working toward bridging barriers and seeking peace and unity. In this sense religious people cannot afford to be indifferent to such a worldwide paradigm shift.

Thirdly, in this era of religious pluralism any exclusivist religious tendencies would seem unacceptable and tantamount to enmity with human communities' drive for physical and economic cooperation and development, particularly in the West African situation where people are born and raised in pluralistic contexts.

Fourthly, people can only talk peace and see peace as an essential part of life if during stable times they learn to live at peace and coexist with one another. In that case a simmering or imminent conflict will be seen as new thing to be prevented or stopped. Dialogue of life can enhance peace and peaceful coexistence. The same route of dialogue can be pursued in the event of communal violence of any degree.

The Effects of Dialogue of Life

The effects of dialogue of life are many and diverse. Firstly, any community that practices dialogue of life is in a position to tolerate one another and coexist peacefully. Believers of the different religious communities find living together and accepting one another as natural and habitual. They practice their religion freely and with open minds.

Secondly, in the event of a conflict or violence of any nature, members of the communities are able to detect the signals and most times settle it before it escalates to uncontrollable proportions. York wrote that in the midst of the conflict in Liberia a collaborative alliance between the Liberian Christian Council and the National Muslim Council of Liberia was formed for mediation and transformation of the conflict, which became known in the 1990s as

the Inter Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) (York 2009, 236). Though faced with many challenges, the IFMC was successful in leading in the management of the conflict until elections were held in 1997. Christians and Muslims have since continued to collaborate in the search for a lasting peace, reconciliation, and healing in that country. Even though the conflict in Liberia had gone beyond proportion to nationwide dimension, the leadership of the two religions worked together and got the people to accept that the conflict was first and foremost not a religious conflict. First, the religious leaders held joint meetings among themselves to dissociate themselves from the conflict. Second, they made joint public statements to the effect that the conflict was political and not religious. The Leaders then moved to Ghana to meet the then Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), President Rawlings of Ghana, seeking regional intervention.

Since 1978 a Forum of Religious Bodies comprising the Leadership of the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in Ghana and the Ghana Muslims' Representative Council had collaborated in so many ways until the 1990s, when a new form of Muslim fanaticism emerged in Ghana. This led to the outbreak of religious violence in many parts of Ghana, including Tamale, Wa, Sekondi-Takoradi, Accra, and Kumasi. Because the leadership was in dialogue with one another for many years it was easy for them to issue joint statements calling the feuding factions to order. In places like the 1995 case of Sekondi-Takoradi, where the misunderstandings turned violent, the leaders were able to move to those places to meet the warring factions to foster peace (Samwini 2006, 219-222). Earlier in 1994 the same group was successful in intervening in inter ethnic conflict involving Dagombas, Nanumba, and Konkomba. Although the conflict was non-religious, religion was implicated by the murder of a Presbyterian Pastor. All these interventions became possible and were successful because the adherents of the two religious traditions within those communities under normal circumstances interacted daily.

Many religious conflicts, the fuel for many wars, are easily eliminated when an atmosphere is created for dialogue of life and constructive engagements among religious people. Dialogue of life results in understanding and tolerance, both of which make peaceful coexistence possible.

In another example we consider the case of the Gambia, a little country off the western coast of West Africa. The country with a population of a little over two million people exemplifies dialogue of life. A good dialogue of life is practiced on daily basis in the Gambia. Muslims and Christians in this country share the same streets and same offices. They also participate in each other's funerals, weddings, and name-giving ceremonies. Christian-Muslim intermarriage is a common feature in the Gambia. Such marriage ceremonies are officiated in the church by priests without any inhibition. Following such intermarriages many adherents of the two religions are related.

In daily life Muslims and Christians in the Gambia like their counterparts across West Africa share the ups and downs of life. The Gambia is a country where the Muslim producer of Christian radio programs has no qualms in filling the remaining minutes of the Christian program "call to worship" with an advertisement for the hajj, followed by the song "Onward Christian soldiers." No one seems to take offense. Similarly, in Ghana, it is common for a Muslim to enjoy Christian gospel music and even request it on the radio to be played for a friend. Not only do Christian radio producers dedicate the entire program period for best wishes to "our Muslim brothers and sisters" on the occasion of the *'id al fitr* (festival of thanksgiving) or *'id al adha* (festival of sacrifice), but Christian listeners do phone in to request songs for their Muslim neighbors and wish them *id Mubarak* (festival full of blessing).

Dialogue of Life in Community Building

Religious activities are often of paramount importance to the lives of many West African communities. In this sense both the sacred and the secular aspects of life should be of concern to individuals and communities if they are to attain total development.

When people tolerate one another and coexist in peace, the local community can develop physically. The community can come together and speak with one voice, and policy makers will listen. It can also lead to development of the various religious communities. Religious people can go about their religious life freely, thereby giving an example of what God is doing in their lives. It is a generally known fact that development comes at the heels of peace and stability. These two come to the community when the different people that comprise the community learn to live tolerantly with one another. The catchword here is "learn." Toleration does not come automatically. Individual human beings have inherent differences between them. Religious differences further complicate the natural differences among human beings. Religious and ethnic communities have many things that naturally divide them. Language, culture, theology, and ethical values are some of the issues that divide religious and ethnic communities. Communities, whether religious or social communities, can live in harmony and develop if all these differences are seen as opportunities and are harnessed for the common good. Diversity is not evil in itself, because nature itself created diversity. What human beings do with diversity is

what concerns this paper. With a greater emphasis on dialogue of life, the diverse communities in West Africa can forge ahead for development.

Conclusion

Religion plays a key role in making people good. The effective result of making people good is reflected in the value of the community in which the religious people find themselves. This is an emotional as well as value schema. In the situation of dialogue of life, religious people come to know the other religion based on daily observation and interaction, while the comprehensive understanding of their own faith is as a result of the teaching they receive. My thesis here is simply that the West African sub region is a pluralistic community. It needs religious people to interact more purposefully on a daily basis in order to develop. For where there is peace and toleration among the adherents of different religious traditions, as with the cases of the Gambia and to a lesser extent Ghana, optimum development is possible.

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Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel: A 21st Century Imperative

By Denise Yarbrough

Abstract

In this article the author reviews the context of contemporary American Christian experience, which is a thoroughly multi-religious, pluralistic context. The article argues for an approach to Christian preaching which would at all times interpret Christian texts in a way that is radically hospitable to and respectful of other religious traditions, avoiding supercessionism, triumphalism or any sense of superiority. This pluralist preaching model would seek to proclaim an emerging gospel that is formed and proclaimed in conversation with the wisdom and insights of many world religious traditions. Such preaching is presented as a spiritual imperative for 21st century Christian formation.

Interfaith dialogue has exploded in the United States since 9/11, as more and more ordinary citizens seek to understand people of different world religious traditions. Many mainline Christian denominations are actively engaged in interfaith dialogue as believers seek to learn about the many different faith traditions that are now a part of the American cultural landscape. In cities and villages across the land, interfaith dialogue groups are engaging in all kinds of interfaith activity, including educational programming, community service and advocacy work. As interfaith dialogue becomes increasingly prevalent, the task of preaching Christian texts with sensitivity to the pluralistic context in which such preaching happens becomes critical.

A Christian preacher today enters the pulpit with Christian texts that must somehow be broken open for a congregation comprised of people whose neighbors, colleagues, and family members may be of a different religious tradition. How is a Christian to relate to her Muslim co-workers or his children's Hindu friends? What do the claims of our Christian tradition mean in the face of the religious diversity that surrounds us? How can we preach the gospel without appearing to condemn our interfaith neighbors or to suggest that while their religion is interesting, only ours is "true" or "valid" or offers "salvation?"

The religious landscape of twenty-first century America differs radically from that of fifty years ago. Christians in North America today are living in a culture in which their mainline faith is assumed to be the religion of the majority when in reality the Christian faith has lost adherents in significant numbers. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports "the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country" (Pew Forum 2008, 5). Religious diversity (and pervasive secularism) has transformed our culture in dramatic ways. Theologian Douglas John Hall writes:

We do our theology from now on in the midst of many others "who are not (but decidedly not!) of this fold." Our own *faith*, if only we are aware of it, is a constantly renewed decision, taken in the knowledge that other faiths are readily available to us (Hall 1991, 208-203).

This enormous change in the religious landscape has profound implications for how we preach the Christian gospel in this multi-religious context. Diana Eck writes:

[M]ake no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.... The issue of living in a pluralist society and thinking theologically about the questions it poses is important today for every community of faith. How do we think about our own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives? (Eck 2001, 4).

Theologian Paul Knitter explains the emerging theologies of the religions within the Christian tradition. He sees the pluralistic nature of our modern world as something that poses problems for Christians but also holds much promise. He says:

But today, the presence, power, and richness of other religious traditions have vigorously entered Christian awareness. Our contemporary intercommunicating and interdependent planet has made us aware, more clearly but also more painfully than ever before, of the multiplicity of religions and of the many different ultimate answers (Knitter 2002, 1).

Theologians like Knitter have been wrestling with the significance of other world religions for Christian theology for many years. At the professional level, interreligious dialogue has been ongoing since the early twentieth century. The laity, however, has been less involved in this interreligious enterprise. And parish clergy, if they have studied the theologies of religious pluralism at all, rarely, if ever, apply that theology when they are preparing sermons,

particularly if their theological position leans toward a pluralistic perspective. Given the current cultural realities the time has come for pluralist preachers to claim their voice and pronounce their pluralistic theology from the pulpit. As more and more Christians have friends and neighbors who practice a different religion, the time has come for Christians to understand those religions and the people who live them. The preacher has a significant role in bridging the gaps in theological understanding and in addressing the questions lay Christians have about other world religions, with a weekly opportunity to engage the texts of the Christian tradition in conversation with the multi-religious reality of our modern society.

In the post modern context, philosophers and theologians no longer speak about one absolute truth, having come to accept as a given that there may well be a variety of “truths” in the world. Post modern thinkers tend to favor “both/and” rather than “either/or” when reflecting on questions of ultimate existential importance. Homiletical texts now encourage preachers to consider the “other” when preaching Christian texts, with “other” usually defined as those traditionally excluded from Christian proclamation like women, people of color, different ethnic groups within the Christian tradition, sexual minorities and the like (See McClure 2001 and Webb 1998). With the exception of those who have taken on the Christian tradition’s sad history of anti-Judaism and the rampant anti-Semitism that followed from it (See Salmon 2006), few Christian preachers have wrestled with the challenge of preaching Christian texts with the “religious other” in mind, particularly from a perspective that would treat those of other world religions with respect. Christian preachers need to be catalysts for interreligious dialogue and lay the foundation for Christians to engage in relationship with the “religious other” in a welcoming and radically hospitable way.

Interfaith dialogue is a crucial component of Christian spiritual formation in the 21st century. Christians must learn about the deep wisdom of their own faith in conversation with the wisdom of their neighbors’ faiths. James L. Fredericks, Roman Catholic theologian, puts it well:

Christianity will be transformed only through the transformation of Christian believers themselves. Here I am talking about a real deepening in our religious vision, a spiritual transformation generated by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions. In this transformation, Christian believers will find a way to deal with religious diversity in a way that is responsible and creative, responsible to the demands of their own religious tradition and creative in looking on the greatness of other religious traditions as a way to plunge more deeply into the greatness of their own (Fredericks 1999, 179).

Fredericks argues for an approach to interfaith dialogue that he calls “comparative theology.” He says:

Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition. Doing Christian theology comparatively means that Christians look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith (Ibid. 140).

Fredericks envisions this process as one aimed at more than achieving mere tolerance between people of different religious traditions. The task of comparative theology is one that pluralist preachers must embrace and model in the pulpit as they interpret Christian texts.

The need for interfaith dialogue that is genuine and honest is crucial. In our post 9/11 world, religious conflicts and differences are affecting all of us in ways we had never imagined possible. No longer can we ignore our neighbors of other religious faiths because they are right here in our own neighborhood, workplace and community. We are all aware of the extent to which religion is often used as a way to oppress others, or as the root of all kinds of violence and degradation between and among human beings. Knitter points out:

To have our own mother tongue and yet to be able to understand and converse in other cultural or religious languages is to feel the wonder and necessity of becoming what we might call ‘world citizens.’ ...In this sense, all of us today are being called toward some degree of world citizenship. Two of the great threats facing the community of nations and cultures are the nationalism and fanaticism that grow among those who have never left their village and who think it is superior to all others (Knitter 2002, 12).

Preachers have a significant role in creating a climate in contemporary Christian churches that will encourage and affirm the kind of dialogical approach to other world religions that Knitter and Fredericks advocate. Given the important role that the sermon has in the formation of Christians today, it is all the more imperative for preachers who embrace a pluralist theological position to have the courage to preach it, no matter how uncomfortable it might seem to do so. In fact, the pluralist position is one that carries theological integrity within the

Christian tradition, so no preacher need feel apologetic about preaching pluralistically. Pluralist preaching fosters Christian formation.

Moreover, spiritual and religious people in our contemporary culture are interested in interfaith dialogue and intrigued by the beliefs and practices of the religious “other” with whom they live and work. To engage the multi-religious reality that contemporary Christians are living is to embark on a journey of spiritual formation that is life giving and energizing and that lessens the impression that “traditional” Christianity is narrow minded, outdated, judgmental and out of touch with our post modern world. The sermon is an important place to begin the exercise of comparative theology and to invite Christians into an exciting journey of interfaith discovery.

Christian theologians have long wrestled with the tension between the exclusive claims of Christianity in light of the multi-religious diversity of the world. A variety of Christian theological approaches have been articulated, some more accepting of other world religious traditions than others. Those theologians who have articulated various forms of pluralist theology, such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, Raimon Pannikar and S. Mark Heim and many others are sources for pluralist preachers to draw upon as they break open the Christian texts every week. Contemporary pluralist theology and contextual understanding of sacred texts provide the tools for a more generous and radically hospitable way of presenting the Christian gospel in a multi-religious context.

Pluralist theologians have tended to fall into three categories of religious pluralism: philosophical/historical (John Hick), religious/mystical (Raimon Pannikar) and ethical/cultural (Paul Knitter) (Knitter 2002, 112-113). Each of these schools of pluralist theologians approach pluralism from a different angle, and each provides a preacher with ways to embrace pluralism in the pulpit. The Hick tradition would drive a preacher to focus more on God than on Jesus in preaching Christian texts, with “really Real” acting as the glue that binds us to all other world religious traditions. Pannikar and other mystical pluralists draw upon the immense similarities between religious mystical experiences across religious traditions, giving preachers a way to lift up Christian mystical experience as a category of world religious mystical experiences. Theologians like Knitter have rested their pluralism upon the common concerns of humanity for a just and peaceful world, and for common efforts to create a sustainable existence on the planet. Pluralist preachers schooled in the thinking of these theologians will interpret Christian texts with considerably more openness to the religious “other” than has historically been true of Christian preaching.

S. Mark Heim has articulated a form of pluralism that is truly post-modern in its approach, positing a theology that accepts that all religious traditions are designed to help their followers achieve different religious ends (Heim 1995). Those different religious ends are, he believes, all good in their own way, but their differences are real and to be respected. Heim’s theology allows a pluralist preacher to approach Christian texts in a way that does not require demeaning or diminishing the richness and wisdom of other world religious traditions even while celebrating the benefits of the Christian tradition.

Some Christian teachers of preaching have pointed out the atrocious history of Christian anti-Judaism that has lent power and legitimacy to all kinds of anti-Semitism for many centuries. Marilyn Salmon thoroughly examines the New Testament texts that have been used to denigrate Jews and Judaism throughout Christian history (Salmon 2006). She calls preachers to task to unpack the gospels and epistles in radically different ways to avoid unintended anti-Judaism and the supercessionism that is embedded in many Christian texts and overt in much Christian preaching. Much of her criticism of Christian preaching with respect to Judaism can also be said of Christian preaching with respect to other world religions. Thus a new approach to preaching Christian texts in a multi-religious context must be developed.

We preach in a world marred by violence and conflict, often overlaid with religious language and bigotry. “Islamic extremists” has become a synonym for “terrorist” and unfairly characterizes a rich and wise religious tradition followed by millions of faithful people. Preachers of the gospel today must articulate a gospel of love and reconciliation that extends to people of all world religious traditions, not just other Christians. Forming Christians for the twenty-first century means proclaiming a gospel that brings hope in a conflicted world and encourages respect and delight in the religious other.

Pluralist preaching is an adventure. The preacher is challenged to find new meanings in old texts and to participate in defining what is “gospel” in the twenty-first century. The successful pluralist preacher will be one who will delight in the deep wisdom that other religious traditions offer about the divine mystery Christians call God. A pluralist preacher will discover that there is nowhere in the world where God is not, whether in a Sikh *gurdwara*, a Hindu temple, a mosque or an Orthodox divine liturgy. The pluralist preacher will lead his congregation into the gospel and send it out into the world with a hunger to see the face of Christ in the religious other without expecting those people to become like us. The image of the “body of Christ” will become more expansive and multi-valent, reaching beyond the confines of the Christian churches to include all the many children of God who worship in different ways

and know God through different stories. The Christian scriptures reveal God in all God's mysterious diversity, and the pluralist preacher can skillfully open her listeners to the immense complexity and beauty of the divine mystery as revealed in those scriptures with hearts and minds ready to find God in and beyond those texts.

Christians are quick to critique moderate Muslims for their perceived failure to articulate moderate and peaceful interpretations of the Qur'an and to condemn extremists who interpret it violently. The same critique can be directed to Christian preachers who may not believe the exclusivistic language of the Christian tradition but who fail to interpret that tradition in a more hospitable way when standing in the pulpit. Christian preachers need to reframe and proclaim in a radically new way the many texts of the Christian tradition that have formed the basis for contempt of other religions, boastful pride in our own, and all too often, violence against those who do not share our Christian commitments. For example, John 14:6ⁱ has often been used to "prove" that only those who follow Jesus will be saved. That text appears in the Revised Common Lectionary in Year A on Easter 5. A pluralist preacher will confront the exclusivism of that text, explaining the conflicted religious context in which John's gospel was written. The pluralist preacher may also point out that Jesus says in verse two, "In my father's house there are many mansions." The possibility of "salvation" for others among those many mansions can be lifted up as a counterweight to the exclusive language of verse six.ⁱⁱ Theologian Paul Knitter has preached on that text affirming "Jesus is the Way that is open to other ways."ⁱⁱⁱ

Pluralist preachers will lift up the beliefs and practices of other world religious traditions, referring to the Muslim fast during Ramadan and comparing it to the Lenten season of fasting, or comparing Christian contemplative prayer practices to Buddhist meditation. By making favorable references to other traditions, the preacher creates a pluralistic and inclusive gospel. Comparing texts of other world religious traditions to gospel texts helps to create an attitude of respect while offering a dialogical opportunity to grow in understanding. Referring to the holidays of other traditions in the course of weekly preaching normalizes those religions for a congregation and invites a hospitable attitude to them.

Pluralism is about how we engage the multi-religious diversity of our culture. We can either retreat into our own corners and speak only to those who are like us, confining our knowledge and understanding and even experience of the divine to the boundaries of our own tradition, or we can embrace the wisdom and color and infinite variety of ways of knowing and engaging the divine being we Christians call God in all the other religious traditions that share our neighborhoods and towns and villages. Pluralist preaching can open up not only the Christian gospel but the immense wealth of wisdom and experience held in the many religious traditions of the world, inviting believers on a journey of discovery that will enrich their Christian faith and life in unexpected and delightful ways.

Pluralist preachers learn that engaging the gospel in conversation with the wisdom of the many other religions of the world creates exciting moments of epiphany, when the scriptures come alive in unexpected and delightful ways, bringing deeper meaning and richness to texts that have been broken open and proclaimed for these two thousand years in so many different ways. As Joseph Webb suggests, the gospel itself is pluralistic and "emerging" (Webb 1998, 104). He writes:

It is not so much that our sermons must "preach the gospel"; it is now that our sermons have to be part of discovering gospel-not necessarily "the" gospel, but "gospel." ... Christianity must come to terms with its own relativity. This is not a value statement; it is an axiomatic statement (Ibid. 104, 106).

John McClure describes an approach to preaching that he terms "other-wise" preaching (McClure 2001). McClure's "other-wise" preaching is a model for pluralist preachers to use as they embark on interpreting Christian texts in a multi-religious world. McClure explains:

Otherwise homiletics is homiletics that is, in every aspect, other-inspired and other-directed... a form of preaching that is constantly interrupted by the proximity of the other, by an obligation to the other, and by what Levinas calls the 'glory of the Infinite' given in the face of the other (Ibid., 9).

The twenty-first century preacher's challenge is to participate with integrity in shaping and articulating the gospel as it develops its distinctive meaning in the multi-religious context of contemporary Christian life. The "other" that the pluralist preacher must bring into the pulpit is all of humankind in its rich religious diversity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is "good news" for a hurting world, torn by violence and poverty and environmental degradation. The "good news" does not come at the expense of all those children of God who worship in different languages and traditions, rather that good news embraces all of the wisdom and insight and spiritual generosity of the world's religious tapestry. Pluralist preaching is the tool to make interfaith dialogue a staple of Christian formation, opening the hearts and spirits of Christians to the religious neighbor. Such preaching is a spiritual imperative in our multi-religious world.

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Sitting at the Buddha with the Tanna'im: Walking Through the *Dhammapada* and *Pirke Avot*

By DeWitt Clinton

Abstract

This paper examines the parallels between two ancient ethical texts, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, and the Jewish, *Pirke Avot*. Both of these texts offer the reader insights into what is necessary for maintaining “balance” in the world of ethical requirements for treating each other with respect and dignity. Buddhists and non-Buddhists can read the *Dhammapada* for an understanding of how to maintain balance on the Eightfold Path. Jews and non-Jews can read *Pirke Avot* for a similar understanding of how to complete *mitzvot*, often translated as “good deeds.” Each text offers insights into the other religion, reminding readers that these ethical texts offer similar wisdom, despite extraordinary differences in religious beliefs.

Can a little book help those looking for the path to righteousness? Hindus read, even memorize, the *Bhagavad-Gita* for guidance and instruction. Epictetus offers mild rebukes to modern-day Stoics in his *Art of Living*. My interest here in this paper is to examine how Buddhists and Jews can come together, enriching each others' ethical traditions by examining two ancient texts, still beloved and read by many in each religion. For the Buddhist, the *Dhammapada* provides instruction for how to find balance on the Eightfold path. For the Jew, *Pirke Avot*, or “Sayings of our Fathers,” provides a similar view from the ancient Middle East. Both texts are relevant for countless of today's ethical dilemmas.

The *Dhammapada*, written approximately in the same era as *Pirke Avot*, offers the very essence of Buddhist thought and practice. From the 26 chapters divided into 423 verses, we can learn, and even begin to practice, some of the very principles that have meant so much to Buddhists who continue to live a life based on the ethical teachings of the dharma path, or the Middle Way. *Pirke Avot* may be the only text Jews know more than Torah, yet few may think of it as a path of daily instruction. The 108 verses, divided into six chapters, are the defining text of Judaism for many, as well as a collective rabbinic past inherited from the Tanna'im. The text is grounded in references to rabbinic teachers, and its pithy sayings are intended for practical, ethical situations.

Yet as a Jew mindful of mitzvot, I am drawn instinctively to the Buddha's instructions, finding more each day how the dharma path serves as an ancillary to all the teachers in Talmudic and rabbinic Judaism. One of many verses of the *Dhammapada* takes me to the litany of the Kol Nidre (a prayer read and chanted on every Yom Kippur), and in those hours of intense reflection, the definite lines between the two religions begin to fade and meld into one: “Think not of the faults of others, of what they have done or not done. Think rather of our own sins, of the things you have done or not done,” (Mascaro, 1973, 42-3).

As an American, and as a Westerner, I realize how deeply imbedded are certain beliefs, one of which seems to define the great separation between Asian and Western traditions: the notion of something being “over there,” and something being “over here,” or the notion of a *this*, or a *that*. *The more I read Buddhist texts, the more I sense that all of what is here is “one.”* The world as we know it is perhaps still in its place, but the notion of separation is more and more questionable. For Jews and other Westerners, history is the record of human events, and history, in particular, defines Jewish tradition. There is a past, clearly defined, clearly delineated from anything of the moment, or what might be next in Jewish history. This notion of *was*, *is*, and *will be* continues to define our “path” of Judaism, with history encompassing all of the present and future. Yet the more we can recognize that there is no *this* or *that*, the more we can comprehend that the only opportunity we have as sentient beings is to “be” in the present, the more we may be awakened to living and breathing, in the presence of *Ha Shem* or *Adonai* or *Yud Hey Vuv Hey*, or whatever name we ascribe to a divine presence in this world.

Perhaps the most illuminating concept of Buddhist thought is that there is no separation of anything from anything else, known sometimes through the principle of “all is one.” This includes all of nature and all that humans have created. Once we can begin to see that we are all inter-connected to all that is in the universe, we may be more receptive to the notion of tolerance and respect for *all* that is living, as well as all that is non-organic. This may be best understood in my evolving perception of mountains. To me, they are slowly becoming less as they appear to the naked eye. I have even tried to think that maybe those mountains I see are simply optical impressions, and are very likely only illusions in my mind's eye. If that is an optical possibility, then the mountains, and everything else in view, are all one phenomenon. It's getting easier to see how “all is one.”

When I was stationed for a year of duty as a Private First Class in the foothills of what was once South Vietnam, I understood that the mountain range I looked to every day in the western horizon was just that: the mountain range bordering Vietnam and Laos. At the time, I certainly didn't think those mountain ranges were any part of me. Nor did I think that the foothills, where I stood as an American on a firebase of 105mm howitzers, were an actual part of me. I had not comprehended, in the midst of artillery barrages into the Song Chang River valley, that the forests, the foothills – the very spaces I defined as nature – were a part of me. As a soldier, I had been commanded to see the space as the enemy, so firing into it became for me – and for many of my companions – an act of self-defense. At the time, I had not comprehended that “our life is the creation of the mind” (Mascaro 1973, 35).

The Nixon Administration decided to bomb those mountains and trails in an effort to force a peace negotiation. I certainly did not feel part of that decision, even though I directed barrages of cannon fire at the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. At the same time I was ordering, “Fire” onto the enemy, somewhere else in Vietnam a Buddhist monk was diligently trying to establish peace in his country. When the North finally conquered South Vietnam, the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who now means so much to me in my reorienting of time and space, escaped from his country and established a home and retreat (Plum Village) in France. Had I known Thich Nhat Hanh then, I might have questioned why those mountains were not as I once thought, over *there*, but *here*, inside of me.

Years later, I stood on the Golan Heights and listened to our tour guide tell of the great Israeli spy, Eli Cohen, who dropped eucalyptus seeds which quickly grew into groves of trees identifying Syrian artillery batteries aimed at villages and kibbutzim in the Jordan river valley. Even then, I did not comprehend that those groves, and the Golan Heights which were part of the groves, were part of me. As I now read *The Dhammapada* as much as *Pirke Avot*, I am slowly beginning to realize how the world is less and less separated. Through the writings of this Buddhist teacher, I am beginning to see how the world is one, and how all of us, those breathing, as well as mountains and stars, are all one. We can be reminded of this by the writers of Exodus who tried to examine the meaning of God's name, and perhaps the most creative conclusion was “Ehyeh–Asher-Ehyeh” (Exodus 3:14) or “I am who I will be.” The longer we read only one text, the longer we will continue to believe and see this as our only guiding text. A journey through *The Dhammapada* can be as enlightening and as confirming as one's own Judaism.

Pirke Avot is not an easily interchangeable text with *The Dhammapada*. Yet it is quite remarkable how similar these voices are, coming from such disparate religions. We know for example how important it is to be “guided” into the tradition of Torah, as Joshua says: “Get yourself a teacher, find someone to study with, and judge everyone favorably” (Kravitz 1993, 5). In a section entitled “Endurance,” which includes metaphors of battled-trained elephants, we find the Buddha writing of a similar friendship: “If on the journey of life a man can find a wise and intelligent friend who is good and self controlled, let him go with that traveler; and in joy and recollection, let them overcome the dangers of the journey” (Mascaro 1973, 82). Once we find this connection of guide and companionship in both traditions, the more easily we will see how both the path of Torah and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism have more in common than we might first expect.

What is even more remarkable is that *Pirke Avot* and *The Dhammapada* each evolved at about the same time, no earlier than the third century B.C.E. And while the *Mishna* (early second century C.E. rabbinic interpretations of Torah), which *Pirke Avot* is part of, developed into its form as we know it from different conversations over the next five centuries, it is difficult to gauge how long the process took for Buddhist monks to gather, compile, edit and shape the *Dhammapada* into literary form. We do know the process was generally completed by the third century B.C.E. Both texts also come out of a rich tradition of wisdom literature, each exemplifying their own ethical paths in different faith traditions. Both have strikingly comparative modes of argument rich in maxims and aphorisms. Rabbi Tarfon is remembered as saying, “The day is short; there is much work [to be done]; [yet,] the laborers are lazy, [even though] the wages are great and the Householder is insistent” (Kravitz, 1993,29). Likewise, the Buddha is also remembered as saying, “The man who arises in faith, who ever remembers his high purpose, whose work is pure, and who carefully considers his work, who in self-possession lives the life of perfection, and who ever, for ever, is watchful, that man shall arise in glory” (Mascaro 1973, 38). These sayings both seem grounded in the notion that work is a noble activity, though one warns about the potential for laziness, and the other affirms that if work is mindful then one is safely traveling on The Path. As one takes a journey through both of these small books of ethical instruction, one can't help but begin to imagine possible conversations of Jews and Buddhists taking place on trade routes from the Middle East toward Asia. Roger Kamenetz, author of *The Jew in the Lotus*, also wondered about this as he reported in his travel memoir that Emperor Ashoka, one of the first conqueror/soldier converts to Buddhism, may have sent missionary monks to the Middle East.

The two texts are also similar in structure, though the oral tradition from which both evolved may have been quite different from what we read today. The *Dhammapada* now

comprises 423 verse/aphorisms, divided into twenty-six thematic chapters such as “Arise,” “Watchfulness,” and “Endurance.” *Pirke Avot* is a collection between 108 or 127 verses (depending upon translations) of sayings of the Tanna'im, rabbinic sages whose commentaries appeared in the *Mishna*. One can almost hear the arguments rising and falling amidst much ongoing debate of sixty or so rabbis over a 500-year period. The *Pirke Avot* tractate of the *Mishna* is now divided into six chapters of equivalent length, with the number of verses ranging from eleven in Chapter VI to twenty-two or twenty-nine verses in Chapter IV. Neither ethical text discussed here is designed to be read sequentially, as there is no clearly defined beginning, no dramatic narrative, and no climax that one might find in ancient world histories such as the Book of Exodus or the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Yet, most readers today read both texts from beginning to end even though one verse does not necessarily lead to the other. The last verses of each text do not provide the kind of closure readers are accustomed to with narratives or sermonic material, yet readers are also aware that wisdom literature seldom provides a dramatic conclusion, but simply an ending of these “sayings.”

While the “Sayings of our Fathers” may be based upon gleanings from Torah, and from that, the implication of the 613 mitzvot, *The Dhammapada* is based upon the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, leading to the Middle Path, or the Eightfold Path. As Jews we are certainly mindful of what Buddhists refer to as suffering. How can we not be? It is the *tsuris* of our history. Torah informs us about that suffering through the Biblical narratives, nearly all of the prophetic writings, and even in the Psalms. But for the Buddha, simple knowledge of that suffering didn't bring the penitent into a peaceful existence. The individual wasn't more tranquil, blissful or near a state of nirvana simply by knowing about suffering. One had to know the source of that suffering, be released from it or at least attempt to cease doing what caused it, and finally, one had to take ethical steps in order to reach any state of well-being. Those steps, the traditional Eight Fold Path, are a way to live mindfully in this world, in balance with the world, and all that is in this world. For Jews the S'hma (“Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One”) affirms the existence of God. Yet Buddhists have no interest in a creator god, a sustainer god, or a god of redemption. Often characterized as atheistic, even nihilistic, the Buddhist sense of the past or even the future doesn't have the resonance for history that Jews have. For Jews, history is never old, as it is constantly re-interpreted in the present, retold over the centuries and made meaningful by all the teachers of Torah, including the Tanna'im and all who followed.

Chapter IV of the Tanna'im offers an excellent example of a Jewish “path” toward a clearer realization and aspiration of holiness. Verse 1 offers a glimpse into the psychology of different types of human behavior, and according to the rabbis, each type (wise, mighty, slow to anger, rich, and honorable) has its own mitzvah (commandment) of holiness. The foundation of action, in a Jew's life, is mitzvot, and this is reflected in verse two by a similar Buddhist notion that good deeds create more good deeds, and likewise, evil deeds lead to more evil deeds. Jews are reminded in verse three not to despise anyone, and not to complain about anything for everything has value. While complaining may bring some immediate solace to the negative spirit, it does little for anyone pursuing a path of holiness. Even the Buddha cautioned against this type of behavior, teaching instead a path of virtue as the only way to reach *nirvana*. We are constantly reminded of the image of the decaying body in Buddhist literature. In fact, that image is often suggested as *the* image to meditate upon, not unlike the fourth verse in Chapter IV which reminds readers of the body's eventual decay: “...Be exceedingly humble of spirit, for the human hope is only the worm” (Kravitz 1993, 58).

How can one pursue a life of holiness, or have any honor, if the name of God is blemished in any way? This is the essence of the latter half of the fourth verse. Though the *Dhammapada* does not refer directly to this principle, the name of Buddha is highly revered, and blemishing the name would seem antithetical to someone who wishes to maintain a moral equilibrium by following the Eightfold Path. Judaism is not abstract, theoretical, and designed simply for reflection and philosophical speculation. Instead, it is a religion of practice, and in verse five of Chapter IV, this principle is reinforced over simply learning Torah in order to teach Torah. This teaching is analogous to not only knowing the Four Noble Truths, not only knowing Buddhist scripture, but also leading a life of balance and centeredness on the Eightfold Path. Just as the Buddha reinforced community with the institution of *sangha*, so too did the rabbis reinforce the notion of connectedness to a community, and not isolated study. Also, as part of verse five, the rabbis reinforced the principle that study of Torah should not lead to profit (at least not until the modern era), for the goal of the rabbi was simply to provide guidance and instruction. Likewise, Buddhist monks are reminded that while the laity supports them with whatever meager provisions, the monks, in turn, shall provide instruction of *dharma*, creating harmony for both.

Verse six of Chapter IV of *Pirke Avot* notes that honoring and dishonoring Torah honors and dishonors the world. Buddha also acknowledges such thoughtlessness when he warns his followers of carelessness in regard to acts of devotion (Mascaro 1973, 79) or “when vows are broken, or when the holy life is not pure” (Ibid., 79). In the chapter entitled “In Darkness,”

Buddha advises, “better to do nothing than do what is wrong” (Ibid.). The path for the Buddhist, even if as a monk in a *sangha*, is always an individual path. Little is said in the *Dhammapada* concerning judicial decisions surrounding legal petitions, or litigants, or judgeships, yet by extension, all of the chapter entitled “Watchfulness” (Ibid., 38-39) applies as well to the Tanna'im's concerns for a proper attitude in a public role. The negative characteristics that lead Buddhists off the Middle Path include unwatchfulness, foolishness, ignorance, and carelessness. These behaviors can only lead a Buddhist away from *nirvana*, the “release” of almost an infinity of suffering. Likewise, the rabbis in Chapter IV, verses seven and eight of *Pirke Avot* advise Jews to be “watchful,” particularly as it applies to determining fault in court cases. A person could easily slip into foolishness and arrogance in this role, and if one serves as a judge, more than likely one would see the worst forms of human behavior. Both the Buddha and the rabbis direct individuals to be constantly alert. Far too many dangers exist when carelessness becomes the norm. Perhaps the rabbis would have found Buddha's remark in Chapter nineteen, “Righteousness,” to be as equally salient in their own tradition: “A wise man calmly considers what is right and what is wrong, and faces different opinions with truth, non-violence and peace” (Mascaro 1973, 73).

The rabbis warn, in Chapter XIX, verses nine and ten, against devoting too much attention to gaining wealth, and by extension, gaining too much prestige and honor in the community at the expense of study and reflection of Torah. Nothing can be gained, writes Rabbi Meir in verse ten, by neglecting Torah, but abundance of “reward” comes to the Jew who makes Torah a daily path. In similar fashion, the “wealth” of a Buddhist is not determined by his or her financial portfolio, but by how attentive and awake the individual is of the Eightfold Path. The goal is a blissful *nirvana*, and paying only occasional heed to the Path will not only impede the journey, but will affect future lives as well, as actions of this day always affect a karmic future in another life. Better to be mindful of the Path, and to be mindful of Torah.

By now readers can certainly infer that both the rabbis and the Buddhist monks had far more in common concerning the path individuals must follow regardless of whether the instruction leads to the Eightfold Path or Torah. Had the ancient Eastern and Middle Eastern trade routes been even more open to a multiplicity of ideas, we probably would have seen the kind of harmony of ideas that exists today when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama offers to speak with Jews either in Dharmasala, India, or to many gatherings of spiritually minded people around the world. The *Dhammapada* is not all that different from the spirit or intent of *Pirke Avot*, and those sayings of the Jewish rabbis certainly provide resonance to readers of what purportedly the Buddha is remembered as saying in his 40 years of walking and teaching in northern India.

Of the remaining twelve verses in Chapter IV, the rabbis offer a wide range of wisdom for how to live in this world, and sometimes, how to prepare for Olam Ha-ba, or the next world, a concept Buddhists might find as an interesting variation of *samsara* (the cycle of reincarnation) and ultimate *nirvana*. The Torah path these rabbis take is a conservative one, much like the Middle Path. It reminds the Jews of the Roman Empire to be cautious, to be mindful of the task of living on this earth, and to be attentive to the instruction of Torah. Good deeds, of course, are better than transgressions (Mascaro 1973, 62), honor of a student or another teacher is essential to this life on earth, and caution in teaching is always a mindful act (Ibid., 63). Other rabbinic insights focus on the importance of a good name over possessions or position (Ibid., 63-64), living close to Jewish communities (Ibid., 64), letting go of the need to explain why sinners may be wealthy, or accepting the pain that visits the pious (Ibid., 65).

But one of the most intriguing verses in the latter half of Chapter IV reads remarkably like an insight of Buddhist philosophy. Rabbi Yaakov seems to be of the same mind when he argues, “An hour spent in penitence and good deeds in this world is better than all of life in the world to come. An hour of contentment in the world to come is better than all of life in this world” (66). Keep in mind “this [Jewish] world” was a life of suffering and remorse, akin to the political situation of Rome's dominance in Judea. It is helpful to remember that the final release of suffering, in a Buddhist's mind, may come only after many lifetimes, so no comparison can be made between Nirvana and the Pharisaic institution of resurrection of the dead and the world to come. Still, the similarity between the Buddhist doctrine of absence of suffering leading to *nirvana*, and the hint of blissfulness in reflection upon the next world for devoted Jews is certainly, noteworthy.

Chapter 8 of *The Dhammapada* includes fifteen verses which come remarkably close to the sense of *Pirke Avot* IV:17 (Mascaro 1973, 66). By far the closest connection is verse 110, Buddha's comparison of *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) to *yetzer ha-tov* (good inclination): “Better than a hundred years lived in vice, without contemplation, is one single day of life lived in virtue and in deep contemplation” (Mascaro 1973, 51). The Buddha is remembered as saying likewise in the next verse, “one...day...lived in wisdom and in deep contemplation” is far “better than a hundred years lived in ignorance, without contemplation” (Ibid.). The question we might raise is just what is the object of contemplation (perhaps a decaying body, or one of the Four Noble Truths), and what is the absence of that suffering, or what is the contemplated bliss of *nirvana*. While it may be a gross overstatement to suggest the two Traditions merge here in the

“better than” verses, we can see a likeness as to the necessary steps, mitzvot, or commandments needed to reach both nirvana and *Olam Ha-ba* (the Jewish after life, or world to come).

At this point in *Pirke Avot*, it's almost as if Buddha's monks are God's rabbis, and are speaking harmoniously: one faith speaking of sins of this world, the other, as Buddhists, speaking of release from those sins. Listen to Rabbi Elezar Ha-kappar in verse 21 of Chapter IV: “Envy, lust, and [the pursuit of] glory take a person out of this world” (Kravitz 1993, 68). The Buddha's insights of human behavior (The Four Noble Truths) are universal insights, and in response to this Buddhist-like rabbinic insight about the suffering caused by human desire, the Buddha said in the chapter entitled “Cravings,” “...whoever in this world overcomes his selfish cravings, his sorrows fall away from him, like drops of water from a lotus flower” (Mascaro 1973, 83).

By taking just one chapter from one of the most popular Jewish texts, and a few verses from a Buddhist wisdom text, we can begin to see how both monks and rabbis have shared concerns about how to live on this earth without realizing a conversation had actually been taking place. What we can do now is be mindful of our shared traditions concerning human suffering, and acknowledge that both paths, the path of Torah and the Middle Path of Buddha, offer striking resemblances. When one begins to study the two, it may require the same vigor as climbing mountains. It may not be so important to completely scale the mountain. What might be more gratifying is to begin the climb.

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He recently presented his artistic work of blending images of Auschwitz with the Tao de Ching at an international conference at Jagellonian University in Krakow, Poland. He is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin--Whitewater, and lives with his wife in Shorewood, Wisconsin.

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Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue in Ladakh, 2010

By Maria Reis Habito

A Buddhist Muslim dialogue on the topic “Addressing Violence: Religious Resources for Conflict Resolution” was held at the Mahabodhi International Meditation Center (MIMC) in Leh/Ladakh, India from June 28-30, 2010. This dialogue was the twelfth in a series of dialogues organized by the Global Family for Love and Peace (gflp.org) and the Museum of World Religions, this time in collaboration with the Mahabodhi Center (mahabodhi-ladakh.org) and its founder, the Venerable Sanghasena Mahathera. The series was initiated soon after 9/11 by Dharma Master Hsin Tao, founder and abbot of the Wu-sheng Monastery and founder of the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan. The dialogues seek new perspectives of Buddhist and Muslim co-operation in facing the challenges brought on by political, religious, economic and ecological crises of the twenty-first century. The first dialogue took place at Columbia University, followed by dialogues in Malaysia, Indonesia, with UNESCO in Paris, Iran, Spain, Morocco, China, and with the United Nations in New York, Taiwan, and Australia. The dialogue in Ladakh consisted of three panels addressing the following topics:

- 1) Aspects of Buddhist-Muslim relations in History and Present Times
- 2) Buddhist and Muslim Visions for Global Peace
- 3) Tasks and Challenges for our Contemporary World

Since the arrival of Islam in Ladakh at the end of the fourteenth century, Buddhists and Muslims there have maintained a predominantly peaceful kind of co-existence, with both communities deeply connected by intermarriages and cultural ties. But the political and economic tensions that led to a boycott of Muslim businesses by Buddhists in the 1980s still have repercussions today. Nevertheless, Ladakh is regarded as a model of peaceful co-existence and cooperation between the religious communities, one very different from the neighboring crisis region, Kashmir.

At the conference, representatives of both traditions spoke about the importance of reading texts, understanding their historical contexts, and applying the messages to present day circumstances. The question was raised as to why the teachings on peace, justice, love and non-coercion contained in the scriptures of both traditions are not more widely realized in practice. The pervading reality of violence in our global society was described in its multi-leveled dimensions, including the structural violence that continues to dehumanize a significant portion of the global population and which results in the deaths of 30,000 children under the age of five due to hunger and malnutrition on a daily basis; the many forms of physical violence perpetrated by humans against each other; and notably the violence against nature brought about by our lifestyles in this technological civilization.

From a Buddhist point of view, the basic problem is the dualistic view of Self and Other which makes us hold on to the three poisons of ignorance, greed, and anger, not only on the individual level but even more destructively on the collective level of interest groups, governments, and global corporations. On the Muslim side, a local imam portrayed the United States as “a manifestation of the Devil Incarnate,” and cited it as one striking example of a violent and destructive power exercising hegemony over the rest of the world, a comment which provoked a lively exchange among participants.

Ongoing tasks and challenges as emphasized by the participants include the continuation of interreligious dialogue and cooperation in order to break down the barriers that lead to misunderstanding, prejudice, and demonization of the Other (as brought up in conference exchanges). One concrete outcome of the conference was the proposal for the establishment of an Interfaith Academy and Museum of World Religions in Delhi, an educational institution that would invite leaders, scholars and practitioners of this country that is so rich in spiritual traditions to encounter each other and to collaborate towards understanding and peace between the religions.

The participants of the conference agreed at the conclusion that this dialogue was characterized by a great depth of content and exchange. In addition to the quality of the presentations and the open discussions, the atmosphere of the spectacularly beautifully located Mahabodhi Center and the tireless engagement of its founder, the Venerable Sanghasena, its staff, volunteers, students, nuns and monks greatly contributed to this success of the conference. The cultural programs and the shared visits and conversations at the Jama Mazjid (Suni) and Imam Bada (Shia) mosques, the Jokang temple and Spituk monastery also gave participants a deep impression of the cultural and spiritual richness of Ladakh and its diverse religious traditions.

Conference Participants: H.H. Gyalwang Drugpa (opening), the Most Venerable Togadan Rinpoche, Shri Lobzang Rinchen, Shri Nazir Khan, Shri Ashraf Ali, the Venerable Sanghasena

Mahathera, the Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Shri Ghulam Hassan Khan, Shri Nawang Rigzin Jora, Imam Moulana Umer Ilyasi, Mr. Zaffir Iqbal, Professor Michael v. Brück, Dr. S.T. Phuntsog, Moulvi Mohamad Omar Nadvi, Professor Siddiq Wahid, Professor Chandra Muzaffar, Sheikh Mohammad Javed, Haj Azgar Ali Karbalaie, Professor Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, Professor Ruben Habito, Dr. Maria Reis Habito, the Venerable Tejananda, Ms. Sonam Dolkar, Dr. Afroz Achmad Bisati, Zain-Ul-Abedin, Ms. Asmat Jan.

Maria Reis Habito is the International Program Director of the Museum of World Religions. She is also an Assistant Zen-teacher at the Maria Kannon Zen-Center in Dallas. She studied Chinese Language and Culture at Taiwan Normal University in Taipei from 1979-81 and received her M.A. in Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies and Philosophy at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich in 1985. She was a research fellow at Kyoto University, Faculty of Letters from 1986-1988 and completed her Ph.D. at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in 1990. After teaching at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, she assumed responsibility for the international Interfaith program of the Museum of World Religions in 2002. She has organized many international Interfaith conferences, notably an on-going series of Buddhist-Muslim dialogues published under the title of *Listening: Buddhist-Muslim Dialogues 2002-2004 (2005)*. Other publications include *Die Dharani des Großen Erbarmens des Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara mit tausend Händen und Augen [The Great Compassion Dharani of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara with a Thousand Hands and Eyes, 1993]*, and „*Weisheit und Barmherzigkeit. Meister Hsin Tao [Wisdom and Compassion: Master Hsin Tao, 2001]*, *Die Krise des Heiligen [The Crisis of the Holy ed; 2009]* as well as articles on Buddhist and Buddhist-Christian topics in academic journals. She is married to Ruben Habito and has two sons, Florian and Benjamin.

Reports on the conference can also be found at the following websites:

<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=42,9312,0,0,1,0>
<http://www.andhranews.net/India/2010/June/30-Buddhist-Muslim-Dialogue-Ladakh-25985.asp>
<http://www.yahind.com/news/directory.php?id=16570>
<http://sify.com/news/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-at-ladakh-to-promote-communal-harmony-news-national-kg4lOfbdbcg.html>
<http://sify.com/news/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-at-ladakh-to-promote-communal-harmony-news-national-kg4lOfbdbcg.html>
<http://www.earlytimes.in/earlytimes1/newsdet.aspx?q=55890>
<http://www.visitladakh.com/en/the-news.html>
http://www.kashmirobsrver.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4882:intl-buddhist-muslim-dialogue-begis-at-leh&catid=3:regional-news&Itemid=4
<http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2010/Jun/29/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-49.asp>

The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue presents its
Call for Submissions for Issue 8: *the Role of Religion in Revolution*



What makes a revolution? Every case is unique. Popular uprising may be spontaneous - the explosive flames of an already primed and oiled wick - or it may be long-awaited and slow to spark. Careful analysis can often find common factors behind revolutions that tell us how humans organize, dream, and express those dreams in collective action. Informed by arguments that see religion as Marx's "opiate of the masses," scholars have long given far more attention to the economic and political factors of revolution than to the religious, but *as long as humans have rebelled against oppressive forces, faith has informed the battle.*

Whether it is the most potent force behind a large-scale paradigm shift, as in the Protestant Reformation, or a more subtle part of people's yearning for freedom, the role of religion in revolutionary movements must be examined. Recent events such as the uprisings in the Middle East and Africa cannot be ignored, but we need not limit our exploration to the contemporary.

The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue seeks articles from students and scholars of history and religion that trace both the subtle and overt relationships between religion and revolution. Please do not feel constrained by the present; we are eager to see pieces that creatively examine this theme in any era. Case-studies are particularly welcome, but pieces with broader focuses will also be considered.