

Values and Risks of International Collaborations on the Study of Religion

Lawrence E. SULLIVAN

Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions

I WANT TO APOLOGIZE for the fact that my talk is not more international in scope, as might be more fitting for the topic. Perhaps it would have been more informative to research the kinds of international collaboration that currently exist around the world in the study of religion. I have not done this and I am sorry if another approach might have seemed more appropriate to this meeting and more interesting to you. Instead, I have chosen to reflect on the rather personal experiences of the institution where I have been serving for the past ten years, at Harvard University. I hope that this example may be of value for exploring the topic I was asked to examine. I wish to thank the conference organizers for inviting me and to thank especially the hosts here at Nanzan University for their cordial hospitality.

The reason that I want to speak to you about the experience of my home institution at Harvard is that it was founded in order to undertake international collaboration on the study of religion, this being the topic which the organizers of the conference have asked me to assess.

I will first sketch the Center's origins and then mention three cases from my own experience as director there in order to develop an understanding of some of the values and risks of international collaboration. The Center for the Study of World Religions was established at Harvard University in 1958, in response to a generous donation from anonymous donors from outside the university in 1957. The university faculty had never thought of such an idea before the donors came to it. This exogenous origin has consequences I will mention later. The donors had developed their idea for a center through international collaboration. They were Christian lay people from New York City who enjoyed studying the religions of the world. They developed their idea for a Center by travelling to England and taking advice from Professor Radhakrishnan, the Spaulding Professor of Religion at Oxford University, whose studies of religions they admired. They invited him to speak at the Inauguration Ceremony of the Center at Harvard in 1960. By that time Professor Radhakrishnan had left Oxford University in England and returned to

his home in India, where he was elected President of India. President Radhakrishnan came to our Harvard Center to speak and to encourage us to continue international collaboration even if it proved difficult.

The first director of the Center, chosen in 1957, was a Canadian, Professor Robert Slater. Slater had served as an Anglican Christian chaplain in the British Army during World War II. In fact, he was captured by Japanese forces and interned in a prisoner of war camp in Burma. During that time, Slater developed an interest in Buddhism and, after the war, he took a doctoral degree from Columbia University in Buddhology and taught at McGill University in Canada. When Slater was approached by the donors and asked to become director of the new Harvard Center, he showed them writings he had penned during the difficult years before, writings in which he recorded his hopes of someday establishing a "super-university," an institution that would go beyond the narrow boundaries of a single university and foster international collaboration and understanding. Above all, he felt it necessary that such an institution study the deepest motivations of the human heart in the diverse cultures of the world. Only in this way, by understanding the different points of view rooted in the religious heart of diverse cultures, he argued, could strong foundations for peace be set down in the world. The values sought in international collaboration, then, were of the highest order: greater mutual understanding and peace among the peoples of the world.

When he became the Center's first director, Slater insisted that the Fellows at the Center come from diverse cultures around the world and that they study and live together in the same place. With the encouragement of the donors and the university, Slater traveled the globe to enlist international cooperation in his effort. Among those he visited was the Imperial Family of Japan, who pledged their support and encouragement for the effort.

In 1959 the scholars that he contacted around the world gathered for the first time in a small rented house away from the university. Some were scholarly Buddhist monks living celibate lives, others were university professors with families of small children. There was only one kitchen to accommodate many tastes. It could not handle the preferred recipes and the diverse religious food restrictions of Jains, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists. The decision was quickly made to build a new home with separate kitchens and apartments. Our Center building, with twenty apartments and twenty-one kitchens, was constructed on the university campus. We are the only Harvard Center to have its own residence.

Besides foods, the international scholars also brought with them many different styles of scholarship. Some were religious gurus immersed in years of yogic practice. Others were textual scholars steeped in the dramatic recitation of ancient scriptural languages or other specialties. Some were devout religious observers who kept up their daily practices of chanting and prayer. Instead of professorial

business suits, they often wore the robes and costumes of their cultures of origin. In America of the 1950s, these exotic extravagances made an impression on the rest of the university. Since the idea for the Center had come from outside the university faculty in the first place, the kind of international collaboration practiced there was not easily understood or accepted in some quarters of the faculty. Looking at the variety of habits in evidence at the Center, including the study styles exhibited in the classrooms or lecture halls, the religious costumes worn on the street, and the behavioral restrictions that affected how doors were opened or greetings were made, some clever Harvard professors nicknamed the Center “God’s Motel” or, using a term even more sharply critical of the international face of the Center, they called it “God’s Zoo.” These terms are occasionally still heard today, though generally said in good humor and with better understanding of our purposes.

Still, one of the great risks of international collaboration in the study of religion is the risk of alienation from and misunderstanding in one’s home institution. Will one’s home institution—one’s own faculty and administration—continue to understand and support international collaboration, especially if it proves to be a genuine collaboration that leaves international partners free to act and contribute in their own distinctive cultural ways? *The greatest and most fundamental risk is that one’s own institution and colleagues will not understand or support the effort.* They may even feel that international collaboration drains resources and attention away from the main mission of the home institution. The negative result of such misunderstanding and lack of support is marginalization from the nourishing energy and conversation that constitute a university and scholarly institution.

To manage this risk, Center directors at Harvard have found it necessary continually to demonstrate the link that exists between international collaboration and the central mission of the university—the mission to understand life in the world. Over time, many generous faculty members at Harvard have responded to this message. Currently about 50 Harvard faculty members with international experience, coming from all the university’s schools and programs, serve on the Center’s five faculty councils: in the natural sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, the arts, and the professions.

Let me briefly mention three international collaborations in which our Center is currently involved, with the generous help of faculty and experts from around the world. These three cases can help illuminate additional values and risks of international collaboration.

All of the Harvard Center’s collaborative projects must aim to accomplish three goals simultaneously. Firstly, collaborative projects must conduct *original research* that requires closely coordinated collaboration on an international scale and multidisciplinary scope. Secondly, they must design *new educational initiatives* to teach the results of that new research. Thirdly, they must propose ways to *apply that*

research so that it can have a positive impact on an issue of great actuality in today's world.

The first example is our project on Religions of the World and Ecology which the Harvard Center has been coordinating since 1995. This effort involves more than 1,000 researchers from some 80 countries. During this time, all international researchers have been brought to the Harvard Center to meet and work with one another. They represent diverse specialties: cultural historians, religious leaders, ecological scientists, policy analysts, historians of religions, anthropologists, environmental activists, government ministers, and so on. They met in a series of research conferences. This required collaboration with institutions around the world: universities, academies of science, federations of indigenous peoples, governmental and non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, and philanthropic foundations willing to support the effort. The final conference took place over several days in New York City last October. One thousand, seven hundred participants met on one day at the Museum of Natural History, where we discussed the implications of our religious research for scientists and educators; on another day we assembled at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, where we concentrated on how best to apply our research in the world of business and public policy. Our Center is publishing a ten-volume book series with the results. In fact, the volumes on Buddhism and Ecology and on Confucianism and Ecology have appeared already. The value of such international collaboration is great: it achieves new insights into the religious roots of environmental problems, on both a local and global scale, and it stimulates new and creative responses to urgent problems.

The risks are also great. Let me point to two risks that emerge in this project.

First, there is the risk of lack of credibility. When a project stretches so vastly across cultures and disciplines, it runs the risk of losing its credibility. For example, will the best work of the most advanced environmental science be included? Will scientists believe that scholars of religion can know and understand the best scientific work? Will indigenous peoples of Africa, Central Asia, and Borneo feel that their religious beliefs and environmental concerns will receive adequate attention vis-à-vis the so-called Great Traditions of the World Religions, such as Islam and Christianity? If credible inclusion of diverse international and interdisciplinary perspectives cannot be achieved or communicated, the project will be perceived as fundamentally flawed, on account of its partiality, and its results will be seen as skewed and unreliable. To overcome this risk, the international and interdisciplinary scope of a project must be blueprinted from the beginning. Then a strategic selection of different and opposing perspectives must be identified and the most credible experts enlisted from the beginning to participate at all points of the compass of the project. If, at the planning stage, we could not enlist the sup-

port and participation of prominent leaders and institutions from all the diverse sectors mapped in our blue-print, we would have had to set the project aside.

A second risk evident in the Ecology project is the risk of *reducing our research and education efforts to advocacy* for certain public policy positions. On the one hand, we wish to join in international collaborations that confront important issues of our day. On the other hand, such issues as ecology are already divided into hotly contested public debates between strongly supported points of view. Look, for example, at the Kyoto conference on Global Warming. While we want our collaborative international research to generate policy applications, we do not want the entire effort to be absorbed into specific policy positions advocated by others, even our collaborators. To overcome this risk we constantly remind ourselves and our collaborators that our work takes its tone from that of *university* research and teaching. Insofar as our projects deal with policy, we take our cue from the university's professional schools and the Center faculty councilors that come from those professional schools. They train people to apply cutting-edge research in the practice of professions such as medicine, law, public health, and government. Our relation to policy, therefore, is to analyze, clarify, and evaluate the premises, promises, and foreseeable consequences of various policies. Our collaborators understand from the beginning that it is not our role to advocate specific policies and lobby for them in the public domain.

A second current project of international collaboration that I wish to mention is the design of the World Religions Museum. Our Center is working with the New York architect and museum designer Ralph Appelbaum, who recently completed the Museum of the Holocaust in Washington D.C. The World Religions Museum will provide some 50,000 square feet of exhibition space and, as far as we are aware, will be the only museum of its kind. The Museum is an emphatically international collaboration for it is being built in Taipei, Taiwan at the request of a Buddhist foundation. Our Center is asked to conceptualize the museum and develop its content. The project has many dimensions of research, from philosophy and aesthetics to architecture and materials design. The Museum is to be an institute of public learning. We are asked to develop the content as well as the process of the education that will go on there.

We have assembled a research team of a dozen scholars at the Center who come from a range of disciplines, countries, and religious traditions. They have helped us create an international network that includes artists, museum directors, curators, historians of art, filmmakers, architects, and religious leaders. The project has a vast range. For example, on the one hand, we have discussed this project at the home of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India in February and at the Buddhist summit held in Lumbini, Nepal last December, and, on the other hand, throughout July 1999 we have held six advisory conferences with 120 leading international

specialists in religious art at the principal museums of North America: the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and so on.

The value of this international collaboration seems worthwhile and is clearly stated in the mission of the museum: to advance the cause of peace and love among the diverse peoples of the world by fostering a better understanding of their distinct religious motivations and traditions. A principal risk of the project has to do with what one might call “the politics of representation.” Who is to speak for “the other”? How can a single institution like a Museum depict in a fair way the many religious beliefs and practices throughout the world? Doesn’t it risk creating more misunderstanding and mistrust by misrepresenting other peoples’ religious lives? We would welcome your advice and suggestions.

We are trying to create a process and attitude that help overcome this risk. The *process* aims to guarantee that insight and perspective are contributed from around the world and from many religious traditions. On the basis of such a process of collaboration and advice, we want to select illuminating examples without attempting to cover all religions exhaustively. The *attitude* is to present our work as an interpretive enterprise in the commentarial mode, not the final word of a defining authority in the scriptural mode. Without performing as ventriloquists who merely mime the voices of others, we are trying to speak in our own voice, the voice of a museum, an institute of public learning which *teaches about* religions, without usurping the role of dharma masters, gurus, priests, and spiritual directors who *teach practice and belief within* religious traditions and institutions. The task is difficult and full of creative tensions. We hope that something good will come from it.

A third and final case of international collaboration need only be mentioned very briefly, for a preliminary approach has only just been made. Still, the project is exciting enough to mention in this context. As you may be aware, at the end of 1997, UNESCO’S 188 national members unanimously approved a proposal to create the Universal Forum of Cultures. The first such forum will be held in Barcelona, Spain in 2004 and will last for 150 days, from April 23 until September 24. (I believe that Tokyo has bid to host the forum in 2012.) The Forum is not simply a new type of world event to celebrate the richness and diversity of cultures (the other internationally-sanctioned world events of this scale being the Olympics and the World’s Fairs). The Forum is meant to be a living process of reflection which creates an international dialogue essential to creating new solutions to challenges faced by humanity in our day.

The Universal Forum of Cultures might be described as a “World’s Fair for the Mind.” It will feature symposia and debates, festivals of the arts, and themed exhibitions. The risk, as is so often the case, is that the study of religion, and the insti-

tutions like ours which try to conduct such study, will be instrumentalized to serve other cultural and political agendas. This risk is magnified by the scale of the event—it is a great risk. An opposite risk, however, may be even greater: by holding back too cautiously on such an invitation, the diversity of the world's religious life may not receive the attention it merits and may not play its appropriate role in the creative process of global reflection.

In this presentation I have pointed to several values and risks involved in international collaboration in the study of religion. In each case I have tried to point to possible solutions in managing such risks. I believe that we must have the courage to confront these difficulties together and find creative solutions to them. After all, what is the alternative? By avoiding *lesser* risks one runs the *greater* risk that the study of religion will absent itself from the global scene. By leaving the international scene, we would fail to exercise our responsible role in fostering international cooperation and understanding—the very conditions that must become the foundation of peace in this and succeeding generations. I hope that we will encourage one another to engage the valuable international initiatives that present themselves to us and help one another manage the risks we incur, so that we may all make the positive contributions to culture that protect and promote human wellbeing. Thank you for your consideration.