# The Dialogue among Religions around the World

## Report on a Workshop

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*On 22 March 2005, representatives from nine countries around the world gathered to present overviews of the current state of religious studies and the dialogue among religions in their respective regions. What follows is a brief account of the workshop, complementing the discussions on the dialogue among religions in the Middle East held the day before. The Nanzan Institute would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Research on Society and Culture of the Suntory Foundation and the Japan Foundation for making these events possible.*

In March 2005, as reported elsewhere in this *Bulletin*, the xix World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions was held in Tokyo. Taking advantage of what was to prove the largest gathering of scholars of religion from around the world in the history of Japan, the Nanzan Institute invited several participants to join us for a day's workshop on "The Dialogue among Religions around the World."

The contrast of reports from regions where the dialogue among religions has flourished for a more than a generation and regions where it has hardly begun or is only beginning to find its footing was both enlightening and a rich source of discussion. In order to provide a common forum for the topic, participants were encouraged to begin with an overview of the nature of religious pluralism and the state of religious studies in the region in which they work, and on that basis to discuss the progress of and future prospects for dialogue among different religions traditions. These presentations were followed by a general discussion in which persons in attendance from other countries were able to bring an added perspective to the presentations.

As it turned out, the way in which the fact of religious pluralism was perceived—whether as a threat to the dominant religion and orthodoxy or an opportunity for religious-minded individuals and established religious institutions—was an important factor in determining the approach to dialogue, and

that perception in turn was closely related to the advance of religious studies as an academic discipline.

## Hungary

Dr. Mihály Toth opened the morning session with a report on the situation in Hungary. Since completing his theological and philosophical studies in Hungary and Germany, Dr. Toth has been teaching at universities in Szeged and Budapest. He began with a short recapitulation of the transition from ancient shamanistic Táltos cult to Eastern and Western Christianity in the middle ages. At the time of the Protestant reformation, large numbers—as much as 60–80% —converted to Lutheranism and Calvinism. With the counter-reformation, the Catholic tradition regained the majority which it retains to the present. During the forty years of Communist rule, there were no reliable statistics about the religious situation in Hungary. Data from the 2001 census indicate that "non-historical churches" accounted for only 1.1% of the population (probably closer to double that amount, since some communities were advised not to declare their affiliation, even though they tend to be much more active in comparison with the "nominal" membership of the traditional Christian churches). Among the non-Christian groups, the largest is the Hungarian Krishna Consciousness Community; the Buddhist community is no more than half its size at about 3,000 strong.

In 1996 efforts were made to introduce religious studies into the university curriculum, formerly forbidden under Communist rule. This year will see the first graduates from the program in Szeged University, and an on-line periodical (*Liminalitás*) and academic journal (*Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*) are already in place. Last year Apor Vilmos Catholic College began a program in Christian theological studies and launched the first printed journal in religious studies in Hungary, *Vallástudományi szemle.* A third initiative, Uniworld, is kind of "virtual university" or non-degree program organized by the Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Within this situation, interreligious dialogue has tended to focus on ecumenical contact among the traditional Christian churches, and to a lesser degree on Jewish-Christian dialogue. Some steps have begun to set up contact between Christians and the Krishna Community and the Focolare movement has set up a more comprehensive program under the unusual name "In Dialogue with Great Religions." Aside from other efforts of individuals, an initiative known as the "Three Cultures Group" has promoted dialogue among Christianity, Buddhism and Science in Hungary. Finally, mention should be made of the Gate of Dharma Buddhist College, in Budapest, the largest Buddhist college in Central Europe with several hundred students. In addition to classical Buddhist studies, its lib-

eral curriculum includes courses on the religions of the Far East. It also sponsors frequent events promoting dialogue at the academic level.

## Romania

Dr. Mircea Itu, a member of the Institute of Philosophy and Psychology in the Romanian Academy, prepared a detailed account of the history and current problems confronting religious studies in Romania, all of which has impeded progress in interreligious dialogue.

The multi-ethnic population of Romania (88% of which are Romanian) is predominantly Christian, with the autocephalic Romanian Orthodox Church accounting for 80% of their numbers, Roman and Greek Catholics, and Protestant making up the difference. The Jewish community is concentrated mainly in the north, and a much smaller Islamic population on the coast of the Black Sea in the southeast. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are by and large restricted to the staff of foreign embassies. During the Ceaușescu dictatorship, the word "religion" had virtually disappeared from published books, and as a result religious studies had a late start. Even today, the study of religion is dominated by theology. Courses on religion in primary and secondary education, although compulsory since 1990, are taught exclusively by the Orthodox clergy and specialists in theology.

Few institutions offer courses in religious studies, as the study and teaching of other religions is considered an affront to Christian faith. Speaking from personal experience as a specialist in Indian religions and the work of Mircea Eliade, Dr. Itu recounted how his classes are regularly attended by a monitoring cleric who informs his superiors about everything that is said concerning Christianity and other religious traditions.

This situation has been aggravated by a major scandal in 2004 surrounding a spurious Yoga movement known as the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute. Since the exposure of the founder, Gregorian Bivolaru, as a fraud, the image of Yoga and Indian religion in general has come into disrepute among the general population.

The Romanian Academy has also been dragging its heels to allot the necessary funds to introduce a program for the study of Oriental philosophies and religions, with Dr. Itu as the only representative of the field at present. Several attempts by intellectuals to organize themselves into an academic society has been hampered by internal squabbles. Lacking a scholarly base and absent even the basic tolerance to study world religions and read their texts, it is not surprising that the dialogue among religions is all but dormant at the present time. Dr. Itu and others are working to change that.

## Ukraine

Dr. Yevgeniya Dodina, associate professor of the Odessa National Academy of Law, addressed the question of dialogue among religions from the standpoint of the legal rights of religious institutions. These rights were severely restricted under Communist domination but their restoration has stirred up another problem whose roots go back to the middle ages, namely the relationship between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Unless this hurdle can be overcome, she implied, dialogue among religions has little chance in Ukraine.

Although there are some 55 religious denominations in the country today, most of them with ties to institutions abroad, the 70% of the population made up of ethnic Ukrainians are, at least nominally, Christian. Since 1991 some 100 Buddhist communities belonging to a variety of sects have arisen, but they function on the fringes of society. Far from being engaged in dialogue with the Christian churches, they are still caught in a struggle for the rights legally guaranteed them. Accordingly, Dr. Dodina focused her attention on the frictions prohibiting dialogue among the traditional Christian churches themselves.

After a brief overview of the history of the conflict, she drew attention to Pope John Paul II's meeting in 1989 with Mikhail Gorbachev, after which Greek Catholic Churches were made legal in Ukraine. Although relations between the Vatican and the Patriarch of Constantinople had improved, the establishment of a Greek-Catholic patriarchate in Ukraine with the backing of the Vatican was viewed by the Patriarch as "a hostile action against all Orthodoxy."

The situation has been aggravated by the active proselytism of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The fact that ecumenical dialogue has often served as a front for such efforts makes progress in the dialogue difficult. Together with the problem of sorting out the apportionment of property confiscated during Communist rule, and new efforts to clarify the legal status of religious organizations, the dialogue among the Christian churches is an urgent task for Ukraine today.

## Belgium

Dr. Catherine Cornille, formerly of the Catholic University of Leuven and current at Boston College, began by noting the important role that Belgium has played in the study of religion and interreligious dialogue, although its situation is representative of many areas in northwestern Europe.

Of the roughly 80% of Belgians that consider themselves Catholic, probably no more than 10% actively practice their religion. Along with Catholicism, the Protestant and Orthodox churches, Judaism, and Islam are also recognized by the state, which entitles them to government subsidies. There is also an important Buddhist presence in Belgium, stimulated particularly by the arrival of the Tibetan monks in the 1980s, but covering a wide spectrum of Buddhist traditions and even new religious movements from Japan. The most critical problem, at the political, legal, and religious levels, is that of accommodation to Islam.

Dr. Cornille noted the situation of religious studies by taking the example of the University of Leuven. Although it long boasted world-renowned scholars like Etienne Lamotte and Louis de La Vallée Poussin, it was not until the late 1960s that Eastern religions began to be taught outside departments of philology to students of theology. That said, the placement of religious studies remains unsure to this date.

As a Catholic country, Belgium has produced numerous institutions actively promoting dialogue among religions. She singled out the Centre El-Kalima, for dialogue with Islam, and Voie de l'Orient, for dialogue with Buddhism—both founded in Brussels in the late 1980s. The dialogue with Islam has been tense over the past years, reflecting the shift in political moods towards the Middle East and the backlash of sentiment against the presence of Muslims in Europe.

The Voie de l'Orient, in which she herself has been active, sponsors regular conferences, workshops, meditation sessions, and retreats. Over the past ten years it has gathered persons and representatives of centers engaged in interreligious dialogue throughout Europe. In a recent gathering held in 2000 it focused on the problem of "multi-religious belonging," which has recently come to challenge the traditional definitions of dialogue. On the academic level she noted the explosion of research and activity at the Jesuit-founded UCSIA Institute in Antwerp.

Initially Catholics were predominant in promoting dialogue with other religions, but of late the Jewish community has also come to the fore. On a national level, the government has organized conferences on the meeting of cultures, a move that contrasts sharply with other countries that try to maintain a strict separation of state and religion.

## Cuba

Dr. Aurelio Alonso Tejada, visiting professor at the University of Havana, began by noting that in the context of his country, the "inter-" of interreligious dialogue necessarily includes dialogue among divergent sectors of a single religion, between religious believers and "atheists," and between religions and society as a whole. Eliminating any one of these risks isolating the effort and diminishing the wider potential for dialogue.

Another important factor is the convergence of Latin American and Caribbean cultures in countries like Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. In addition to the dominance of Catholicism through Hispanic and Portuguese colonial domination, and the African influence that arrived with the slave trade, one has always to take into account the multicultural make-up of the islands both through colonial powers (Hispanic, French, British and Dutch) and through the blend of African, Muslim, and Hindu influences. Cuba is one of a small number of Latin American countries that has tried—naively, in his estimate—to preserve a strict separation of church and state by turning religion into a private affair. Even so, the strong reliance on popular religiosity for the vitality of traditional Catholicism as well as for the Pentecostal movements, and new religious movements that have eroded its influence in recent years, is something this misguided liberalism shares with Latin America as a whole.

After a quick sketch of the variety of religious movements and organizations covered by this situation, pre-Columban, colonial, and post-colonial, Dr. Tejada argued that the intransigence of the Catholic hierarchy towards the actual religiosity of the people and its home-grown "liberation" theologies with their strong emphasis on social justice, has given a hollow ring to its talk of "dialogue." At the same time, he stressed that the fundamentalistic, apocalyptic, and exclusivist tone of more recent religious groups has the same effect. In such circumstances, one can expect opposing sides rather to harden than to soften their attitudes to one another—all at the expense of those in whose name they are supposedly working.

## Brazil

Dr. Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, professor and currently head of the faculty of Theology and Humanities at the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro, began by noting that the process of official government recognition of schools and departments of theology is underway. The science of religions, meantime, is growing rapidly in Brazil, both in private and public universities. Initially leaning towards the social sciences, religious studies has recently shown a keen interest in mysticism in world religions.

Despite being called “the largest Catholic country in the world” (at least in terms of statistics of nominal affiliation), Brazil shows a diversity of religious traditions almost without parallel. Among the traditional, historical Christian traditions, Protestantism and Pentecostalism is on the rise and Catholicism diminishing. There is also a strong tradition of “spiritist” movements, such as the followers of Allan Kardec in the south, and the Afro-Brazilian religions (sometimes erroneously classified as “low-spiritist” movements). These latter are spreading throughout the country. Recent statistics show that the most important of these religions, Candomblé, is spreading more in the south today than among the far larger black population of Bahía.

Although Catholicism was imposed on the population of Brazil by the conquerors from Europe, theirs was only a nominal assent, and this situation survives today among leaders of movements like the Candomblé who profess themselves Christian while continuing in their own religious ways. To one degree or another, this phenomenon of dual belonging is to be found across the country (though perhaps most markedly among Catholics in the northeast of the country). Alongside of this we see the growth of new religions from the East and new ecological religions that involve the drinking of hallucinogenic drinks made of plants from the Amazon. These religions have been most popular among intellectuals and the urban middle class. Even so, this is only a small part of the many religious movements flourishing in Brazil today and they are even making their presence felt in the political arena.

Interreligious dialogue at the formal or intellectual level in Brazil cannot be separated from the fact of multiple religious affiliation, even though this “inner” syncretism rarely reaches the level of articulated “dialogue.” Nevertheless, this has not been the focus either at the level of ecumenical dialogue or the dialogue among different traditions. The study of “theology of religions” is slowly finding its way into the obligatory curriculum of Christian seminaries, leading us to suppose that the day is not far off when it will be.

## Philippines

Dr. Anabelle Dafielmoto, professor of philosophy at the Notre Dame University of Cotabato in southern Mindanao and founder of Religious Pluralism, a group that gathers leaders of Christian, Muslim, and other religions for discussion, began her remarks by noting the widespread policy in Catholic universities in the Philippines to oblige all students, whatever their beliefs, to take courses in Christian theology. In the south, where she works, however, religious studies since the 1990s has made greater inroads precisely *because* of the conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Religious studies has offered the kind of foundation neither theology nor organized religions have been able to and has

proved easier to integrate with subjects like Islamic Studies and Peace Studies. In this sense, religious studies has helped promote dialogue.

The meetings of Religious Pluralism has followed this model, providing a monthly forum for representatives of various traditions (Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Baptists, as well as Buddhist and Chinese religious groups) to present their beliefs in an amicable environment. The effect has been to present a more accurate reflection of religious pluralism—both in the sense of the variety of religious traditions and in the deep desire for peace among those traditions—than that provided by media coverage of the Muslim-Christian conflict.

The widely representative Association of Catholic Universities in the Philippines also holds symposia and workshops of its own on intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The change of attitude at which these efforts aim gives a concrete focus to the dialogue and this in turn supports further research on religion in the universities.

## Korea

Dr. Seung Chul Kim, professor at Kinjō Gakuin University in Nagoya, offered an overview of the traditionally pluralistic religious panorama of Korea and against that backdrop discussed conflicting theological views in Korea concerning the dialogue among the religions that make up that plurality.

Although it has been the Christian community that has been most active in promoting interreligious dialogue, they are a clear minority. It is far more common for the word "religion" to be considered almost taboo among Christians.

There are historical reasons for this. Since Christianity arrived only in 1884, it has become associated with modernization. It has also become a symbol of liberation from the colonial powers of non-Christian Japan, and a line of demarcation from the Communist north. The Korean missionaries who introduced Christianity into the country lacked adequate theological training to understand their own beliefs critically, let alone to dispute with Confucian and Buddhist scholars, whom they simply dismissed as idol-worshippers. As a result, they simply co-existed side by side with other religions.

That on the one hand. On the other, as is the case in many countries of the East, for the Christians of Korea the "otherness" of other religions is less an external matter than an internal one. It is an otherness that can be discovered within, at a level that might be called "unconscious." To study the development of and interaction among shamanistic, Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian religions is not only to get a picture of a historical process but also a portrait of the soul of those who have inherited that history. Viewed in this way, a dialogue that is centered on one's affiliation with Christianity, thus moving all others to the periphery of the Christian believer, risks missing an important part of the hermeneutical picture.

Traditional theology by and large ignored this, and the early attempts to do indigenous theology or create a theology of religions were not able to get a footing. A religiously-grounded critique of the dehumanizing forces of industrialization and the systematic marginalization of the poor served, at least for a time, to raise the problem of religious plurality in the more favorable light of a Minjung ("people's") theology, softening somewhat the rejection of everything that is not Christian. But the challenge for interreligoius dialogue remains not only as an

objective problem but as a problem of self-understanding for Korean believers of all faiths.

## Japan

Yamanashi Yukiko, a junior research fellow at the Nanzan Institute and a specialist in the history of interreligious dialogue in Japan, took on the enormous task of summarizing in a few minutes the religious diversity of Japan—whose broad outlines are already well-known to readers of these *Bulletins*—and the more than half a century of concerted efforts at interreligious dialogue. She began by singling out three forms of the dialogue in which Japan has been active.

An inter-monastic exchange East and West began in 1979 with Buddhist monastics from a variety of sects—Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren, and Shingon—being invited to share in the daily life of their counterparts in monasteries of the West. This was followed four years later by a reciprocal invitation to monks and nuns from the West to live in Japanese temples. Subsequently, nine such formal interchanges have taken place, not to count numerous individuals who have taken advantage of the collaborating network established as a result of these pioneering efforts. On the Japanese side, the Institute for Zen Studies at Hanazono University has played a leading role.

In contrast to this "dialogue without words" at the spiritual level, there has been a lively dialogue among believers, usually scholars, at an academic level. The Nanzan Institute has sponsored many such encounters and published the results over the past twenty-five years, but examples of this dialogue and publications are almost too numerous to count.

Third is what we might call "interreligious cooperation." The most notable form of this dialogue in Japan is in the area of peace activism. This is due in part to the still vivid memory of the atomic bombs that fell on the country in the Second World War and the no less vivid remorse among many religious individuals and institutions for the active or passive participation in the war effort. The Japan Council for Religion and Peace, founded in 1962 and including under its umbrella Buddhist, Christian, and in a special way new religious peace movements, has tried to promote the abolition of nuclear arms and all forms of racial discrimination. These efforts have tried to steer clear of the political arena and to appeal to all levels of society from a religious or humanitarian standpoint. From their first international conference of the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1970 this Council has been conscious of the need to engage religious traditions other than those represented in Japan.

The seventh conference in 1999 brought together more than 1,000 persons from around the world. After the events of 11 September 2001, the group has intensified its efforts. New groups devoted to peace activism have also sprung

up, most recently after the Iraq war of 2003, and the number of religiously sponsored demonstrations and meetings has also increased.

One of the reasons interreligious cooperation has been so successful in Japan is the general preference to avoid confrontation over doctrinal differences and to focus on areas of common concern. This is not to say that Japan has been without religious conflict in its history, but only that a general harmony among religions, coupled with a widespread custom of participating ritually in more than one religious tradition, has come to prevail today. This has even led some to see scholarly and doctrinally focused dialogue as a threat to the current peaceful co-existence and collaboration among religions. Still, she concluded, without bringing these differences to the surface in common forum, the danger that they might flare up into future conflict is always present.

Participants of the Workshops on "In Search of Dialogue in the Middle East" and "The Dialogue Among Religions: Reports from around the World." 21–22 March 2005