

# Buddhist-Christian Interchange: An Attempt at a Definition

Kirti BUNCHUA

*Religion and Culture Research Center, Bangkok*

*The following article is a somewhat edited version of a lecture that Professor Kirti, who lectures in philosophy and religion at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok presented to an interdenominational conference of Christian pastors held in Kyoto from 20 to 23 November of this year. It is printed here with the kind permission of the organizers of that event.*

Let us begin by defining our topic as clearly as possible, before venturing into questions that too easily invite darkness and confusion.

Full, true interchange takes place between Christians and Buddhists only where there is mutual give-and-take. This means that Buddhists must have something to give to Christianity and something to take; and vice versa.

For such *ideal interchange* ever to take place, there must be sufficient preparation by a significant number of the participants. For to enter these discussions unprepared is to risk walking in the air and reducing talk to the level of the sterile and the utopian.

But is it not asking too much to expect this of both sides? And would it not take a miracle of timing for this preparation to be complete at the same time? Perhaps. But while we wait for the miracle, there is much to be done in the meantime to accelerate the process. One of the first steps that can be made is to see what there is to learn from the field of the phenomenology of religion. This is the step I should like to take here.

We may begin by laying the foundations on two basic facts: that any religion can be seen in a variety of perspectives; and that only one of those perspectives is suited to Buddhist-Christian interchange, namely the final one.

## *The Five Perspectives*

### 1. THE PRIMITIVE WAY

The primitive perspective on religion refers to the way primitive peoples fashioned their religion as well as the way more advanced religions were viewed by people of later ages. It sees religion as entirely a matter of conforming to the will of supernatural powers. Primitive peoples did not think in terms of laws to be discovered but only of the superior aims of supernatural beings which they expressed or symbolized as mysterious forces beyond the understanding of the human mind like Fate, Destiny, Doom, Fortune, Magic, and so forth. The most primitives could do was submit to the *fact* that such a will was operating; they could not inquire into its why or wherefore. When the will became manifest, there was no choice but to follow it blindly and without question. Only in so doing would one's actions work to one's own welfare; to resist or contradict it spelled danger.

In this sense, the primary aim of primitive religious people was prosperity in this life. Whatever ideas they might have entertained about the next life, such questions were of secondary concern. One placated supernatural beings by doing their will precisely because one hoped for benefits in the here and now. The next life would, they believed, take care of itself. The primitive philosophy behind this way of thinking rested on the belief that the world or the whole cosmos was without a law of its own, and that everything that takes place in this lawless cosmos or chaos happens by virtue of the will of higher powers, be they personal or impersonal, mysterious or revealed.

This primitive way of life and thought, the first that humanity knew, has survived through history alongside of other ways. Even in our own day, not a few Buddhists and Christians continue to deal with their beliefs in this manner. They expect religion to provide them with worldly benefits, and are prepared to alter their beliefs and practices if such change would redound to their profit. In short, the primitive way remains as popular as ever today. But it hardly provides the right model for interreligious encounter. Let us consider another option.

### 2. THE ANCIENT WAY

The ancient way refers to the characteristic belief of the ancients that the world is regulated by laws and follows those laws with invariable fidelity. The universe is an ordered cosmos, not a chaos or lawless cosmos as the primitives believed. But like the primitive way, the ancient way was not much preoccupied with the next life. They believed that follow-

ing the laws of the universe represented the best way to control life and other creatures. They struggled to uncover the hidden principles that would accord automatic power to those who knew how to manipulate them. If this life is regulated, they seemed to reason, then all would be right with the life to come as well.

For the ancients, the most important function of religious masters was to reveal laws to be followed. The beliefs and practices that were most to their advantage they accepted; those that worked against them they avoided. This meant that they were prone to polytheism and even polyreligionism: they prayed to one god for rain and to another for children, and they would even ask the devil's protection if served their purposes. The alteration of beliefs was not difficult among such peoples, provided always that there was something to be gained thereby.

This attitude that we have been calling the way of the ancients did not pass into oblivion but has survived to the present. It is not hard to find those among contemporary Buddhists and Christians who still think in this way. But as they have been taught Buddhism and Christianity as exclusivistic religions, they tend to restrict themselves to the laws and range of beliefs encompassed by their own tradition, which they consider sufficient to secure all the profit they seek. Indeed, relations with other religions would only weaken the efficacy of their own. Christians of this stamp hold that God created the world and fitted it out with laws. Those of the laws that God chose to reveal to the world are sacred and all-sufficient. To have recourse to what lies outside of divine revelation is to risk displeasing God and incurring divine wrath. In like manner, Buddhists of this type consider Buddha to be the discoverer of the eternal laws. Though Buddha did not teach everything that he had discovered, what he did teach and what has been transmitted through history is sufficient for those seeking release from suffering and the accumulation of as much benefit as possible.

All things considered, it is clear that there is little to hope for in the way of true religious interchange among those who live and think in the way of the ancients.

### 3. THE MEDIEVAL WAY

The third way I should like to single out for attention is the way of belief of the people of the middle ages. Of course, not all the medievals followed the same way; there were some who persisted in the primitive or ancient ways. Only the most "up-to-date" people of the time led what

I am calling the medieval way of life, according to which the world had its own laws, but that reliance on these laws alone were no guarantee of happiness in this life – not even for the most powerful caliph or the greatest conqueror. There were numerous spiritual masters who taught one and all that at most one can expect imperfect happiness of this life. For, as all the great founders of the World Religions had taught, true and eternal happiness can only be attained in the life to come. To this end, these spiritual masters taught ways of spiritual practice, each fitted out with its own rationale that distinguished it from all other ways. Hence a variety of different traditions developed out of the same scriptures but centered on different spiritual masters. Faced with this variety of competing religious ways, the medievals came to realize that what insured the survival of a religious tradition was strong cohesion among its adherents. And this in turn required that one's own tradition be exalted as high as possible above all others. This is the form in which they have come down to our own day, and a form with which large numbers of people continue to be comfortable.

Insofar as such attachment to one's own tradition begets competition, as competition begets distrust, and distrust begets enmity, there is little hope for religious encounter among Buddhist and Christians of this type.

#### 4. THE MODERN WAY

The distinguishing trait of the modern way is the scientific approach to thought and action. The story of the modern age is that of the success of science with its discoveries and practical technologies. It has engendered in people the hope that science may one day succeed in resolving all the problems of human life. The way of science began the paradigmatic logic for all thought. Reason became identified with scientific method. Once the scientific mind-set had taken hold, all other attitudes were dismissed as ancient, obsolete, anti-intellectual, and an obstruction to progress.

In the realm of religion, the modern way has sought to submit all claims to religious truth to the norms of scientific proof. As a result, those who follow this way put great stock in trying to demonstrate the logical reasonableness of what they believe. Not only are there a variety of religious teachings grounded in the religious experiences of different spiritual masters, but now we find an equally wide variety of ways to systematize these teachings. Just as there are many paths to the summit of the mountain, so religious truth admits of many modes of rational

schematization. This attitude promoted still greater rifts within tradition and raised inter-sectarian apologetics to a place of new prominence.

At present, most intellectuals belong to this modern way of thinking and acting. Each is sure of his or her own reasoning and its own assumptions, tacit or articulated. Many give what they consider cogent reasons for not professing any religion at all, while those who profess a particular religious way, be it Buddhist or Christian or whatever, cling proudly to their own system and find security in the companionship of those who think in the same terms, or in the attempt to convert others to their way of thinking. And so the process goes on:

Division begets Competition.  
Competition begets Distrust.  
Distrust begets Annihilation.

The modern way, no less than the other ways, does not hold out much hope as a way to true Interchange among Christians and Buddhists. Another way must be sought.

#### 5. THE CONTEMPORARY WAY

Not all people living today subscribe to the contemporary way of life and thought; those who hold to one of the previous four attitudes cut themselves off from it. But it is becoming more and more widespread among the more searching minds and spirits of our time who think in terms of the future of the human race.

The contemporary way is one of analyzing and criticizing before passing judgment. In a word, the contemporary way follows the following process:

1. *To seek a clear statement of the question at hand.* This requires discipline, in particular of the sort that philosophical method can provide.

2. *To see as many possible answers as possible.* One aims at exposing the question in all its aspects and hence to invite as many different perspectives on its resolution as possible.

3. *To select what is useful for oneself, what enhances the quality of life.* Enhancing the quality of life means rising above competition to rejoice not only in one's own happiness but also in that of others, and to suffer not only one's own suffering but also that of others. Hence the quality of life rises roughly in the following order:

1. To rejoice over the suffering of others,
2. To suffer over the happiness of others,

3. To suffer over the suffering of others.
4. To rejoice over the happiness of others.

The first shows foolish selfishness; the second, clever selfishness; the third, limited good will; and the last, perfect, unbounded freedom.

The mind that follows the contemporary way sees, by critical analysis, that the four previous ways do not lead to the final stage but get stuck in their own attachments. The first way clings to the will of mysterious powers and leaves little room for human improvement. The second way clings to the laws that govern human improvement, but lacks the necessary flexibility to cope with all human aspirations. The third way clings to the life-to-come to the detriment of the quality of this life; it lacks sufficient interest in this world to make it the arena for improving the quality of life. At best the third way can reach the third stage of the quality of life, but because of its attachment to the teaching of one master, tends to produce fanatics prepared to suffer over the suffering of others. The fourth way tends to destroy all religious beliefs in the name of rationality. Those who reflect until they are able to believe reasonably tend to be defensive in their beliefs. While engaging in one's own apologetics, one fears defeat at the hands of another system of apologetics, and thus schools of thought multiply themselves without end, even within the same religious denomination. The followers of the fourth way exhibit an attachment to their systems of thought, more so than is the case in any of the other ways.

The modes of attachment may be briefly set out as follows:

Attachment begets Division.  
Division begets Competition.  
Competition begets Distrust.  
Distrust begets Annihilation.  
Mutual Annihilation begets a Fight-for-Survival.

The new way that is called, the contemporary way, must be one of Detachment. Detachment may lead to division, but a kind of division that will not beget competition but rather a harmonious division of responsibilities.

Applying the contemporary way, the way of critical analysis, to religion, opens up the possibility of a policy of "unity in diversity" in which we can affirm that *all religions are good, but good in a different way from each other*. There is no need to claim that all religions are equal or even that they are all equally good. Nor have we to say that all religions are the same, which we know not to be the case. We do not judge one religion

better than another, but we say that one religion is best for those who select it, while others are best for those select them. By “selection” I mean consent with conviction. Did we not consider our religion to be the best, we should not select it. But at the same time we respect the selection of others. Each one selects what one sees best for oneself and respects the choice of others.

Only among the Buddhists and the Christians of this stamp can proper, unbiased interchange take place. There is no attachment to breed distrust in their hearts. Rather, in a spirit of detachment and trust, they can work together to search out the best, to share the experience of their searching, and to dialogue for the sake of improving the common quality of life. They do not mix all matters religious up confusedly, but use critical analysis to attain clarity of understanding about the foundations of their religious beliefs and about what can be learned from those of other faiths. Finally, they know how to be grateful, both for the religious life of their own tradition and for what other traditions can add to it to enhance its quality of life.

### ***Examples of Interchange***

As a guideline for interchange between Buddhists and Christians, I would like to offer some examples. While they may not be the best, or completely correct, they at least open the way for further questioning of the sort I have suggested here.

#### BORROWING OF RELIGIOUS TERMS

Religious concepts need to be expressed in a comprehensible manner, as all founders of religions have known. When Buddhism is talked about in Western languages, it should use Christian terms in the Buddhist context so that it may more easily be understood by Westerners. This is already being done by Thai Buddhists. For example:

Supreme Patriarch_____	<i>Somdejphrasangharaja</i>
Monk_____	<i>Bhikkhu</i>
Monastery_____	<i>Wat</i>
Meditation_____	<i>Samadhi bhavana</i>

While it is true that this method of borrowing religious terms does not communicate the profoundest and more reliable meaning of the original terms, there is no denying that it helps the general Western audience to

understand easily and immediately. Let the few who want to go more deeply have recourse to the original terminology.

In the same way, Christianity should use Buddhist terms in the Christian context to speak to an Oriental audience, so that it may be easily understood. Here, too, those few who wish to deepen their understanding can wrestle with the original terminology. Here are some examples of this process currently being adopted in Thailand:

<i>Phra Khambhi</i>	_____	Scriptures
<i>Phra Songh</i>	_____	Priest
<i>Bot</i>	_____	Church
<i>Satburut</i>	_____	Faithful
<i>Sil</i>	_____	Sacrament

Surely this interchange of religious terms can be accepted as mutually beneficial for both sides who follow the fifth way, even though it is likely to be rejected by those who adhere to the other ways. Was it not common to hear among Christian missionaries in the past, “We can use your words, but you have no right to use ours,”? Such bias cuts off the interchange before it can begin.

If religion is to survive in this materialistic and consumer-oriented world, let us first be converted ourselves to the fifth way of life and thought, and then attempt to convert others to it. For we shall surely either survive together or perish together – but no religion can last on its own.

#### SHARING OF EXPERIENCES

Surely a Christian cannot have Buddhist experiences as such, nor a Buddhist Christian ones. If you pretend to be a Christian, you will have only experiences of a pretending Christian; and if you pretend to be Buddhist, you will have only experiences of a pretending Buddhist. To have Christian or Buddhist experiences requires that one be a sincere believer in that faith. But this does not mean that such personal experiences cannot be communicated, however imperfectly, to those of other faiths. Indeed, such mutual communications can lead to a mutual deepening of faith. Sharing lead to enrichment; competition leads to impoverishment for it lowers the spiritual quality of those who compete. Buddhists, for example, can share their experience of meditative centering, while Christians can share their experiences of *bhakti* or devotion to the Supreme Being. Buddhists can share their experiences of observing the *vinayas*, while Christians can share their experiences of prayer through good works. And so forth.

Such sharing is only open to Buddhists and Christians of the fifth way, because only they are free of the competitive spirit and hence able to trust each other and sincerely work for the progress and benefit of the other.

#### SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE AND ART

No two persons think in exactly the same way or have exactly the same opinions. The same holds true of individual Christians and Buddhists. The same articles of faiths are professed by all Catholics, for instance, but no two Catholics understand them or apply them in the same way. If it is common knowledge that there are as many opinions as there are thinkers, what is to prevent us from inviting other opinions to enrich the community of our faith and hence enrich the culture of the whole world? Sharing religious knowledge is always a mutually enriching endeavor.

Here again, only Buddhists and Christians of the fifth way can do this. If we distrust one another, thinking all other faiths to be inimical to our own, how can we expect to share out art and out knowledge with them? Would we not rather fear that they would turn them against us to their own advantage?

#### *Conclusion*

Humanity has come a long way through the course of its history, and it has come that way through trial and error. We have tried every mode of distrust and have only seen it fail time and again. Still, it is no easy matter to convert from distrust to trust. Only by deliberately engaging in breaking down the walls of distrust can we open the way to the trust on which friendship is based.

History has brought us to the brink of a “high-tech” global society. In the past the children of mammon (those who have worldly powers) competed among themselves for the upper hand, as did the children of God (those who dedicate themselves to the Kingdom of the Good) – in the name of a true love which is the very contradiction of such competitiveness. How does it happen then that the children of mammon awaken to this error before we Christians do? The children of mammon have learned how to join forces to exploit the children of God. We may be proud of being children of God, but we are still so divided, so bent on competing with each other, that we make ourselves easy prey and even

collaborate in the destruction of other children of God who should be our allies. How can this be?

The pressing task for us is to learn how to collaborate with sincerity rather than to continue competing in our building of the Kingdom of God (which I equate with the Kingdom of the Good. We need both a kenosis and a metanoia. Kenosis means emptying oneself of the “old man” with its time-worn way of loving what is like us and competing with what is different. This emptied self can then be filled up through a metanoia to a new way of seeing, that of the contemporary way. With this new outlook, we can become a “new man” that sets no limits on love. “If you love only the people who love you why should God reward you? Even the tax collectors do that” (Matt. 5:46).

Only in this way can a truly enriching Buddhist-Christian interchange come about, for

Detachment begets Collaboration.  
Collaboration begets Division of Responsibility.  
Division of Responsibility begets Trust.  
Trust begets Peaceful Coexistence.  
And Peaceful Coexistence begets *Interchange*.