

Dialogue in Action

Rev. Ignatius T.F. Tchou, S.J.

interviewed by Brian Lawless

Fr. Ignatius T F Tchou SJ of the Manresa House in Chang-Hua, Taiwan, was born in Shanghai and came to Taiwan about 1960. He became involved in inter-religious dialogue in the late 70's when he was already in his seventies. He began by visiting Buddhist monks and monasteries. He also attended different study courses, read books and collected materials. He went into it with such enthusiasm that he achieved in three or four years what would take others twenty years to do! His colleagues say of him that no one knows the situation as well as Fr Tchou. He is a real scholar, reflecting and reading, seeing things from the point of view of Chinese philosophy and Chinese religion.

What was the greatest difficulty you experienced when you first entered into inter-religious dialogue?

It was very difficult to adapt myself to the Buddhist style and manner of thinking. It is totally different from the Christian approach. In conversation we have very different terminology and, it seems, different ways of thinking. So it is very difficult to try to understand and to communicate. I sometimes find it hard to communicate in words that the other side can understand and I find it difficult to know what they are trying to say. But even though there is a great difference in the way of thinking and in the vocabulary used, the underlying reality we are trying to talk about and the religious experience and spiritual life are essentially the same. Theoretically they are similar. For instance, the Buddhists have the practice of devotion and compassion, and we have charity. The words are different, but the underlying things are the same. So we can talk together and I ask "How are you doing this and that...I do it this way ..." finally we arrive at some common understanding.

What kinds of things do you talk about in dialogue encounters?

Mainly devotion and worship, including practical, everyday things; like prayer for example. It is very interesting. The Pure Land school have a discipline of prayer. I wanted to understand why — why this way of reciting the same six words for hours and hours. We Catholics have something

similar in the rosary but I don't think anyone could say it like that for six hours. They do not have a personal God to pray to. It focuses on the self—I am the Buddha. I find it hard to understand how they can do this.

Have you found that you are beginning to understand what they believe?

No, not yet. But this way of prayer I found is very good. For example, when I now recite the Rosary, I just say Ave Maria. It is enough. It becomes a mantra. I sometimes propose this manner of prayer during retreats.

How do modern day Christians respond?

It depends on the level and the background. If they are from very traditional families then it is more difficult. Young people are much better at doing it... of saying two words—Ave Maria—for one or two hours. But the traditional Christians insist on reciting the whole thing. Even the way of sitting can cause problems for traditional Christians. They say that to sit in such a way is Buddhist and so they are not too comfortable with it. This is very sad to say.

If Christians have difficulty accepting something which they see as Buddhist, would Buddhists have difficulties with things that are Christian?

Yes, they find it difficult to understand our concept of God, especially as portrayed in Scripture, where God sometimes punishes. For them this is a major stumbling block, very unlike Buddha who is wholly compassionate. Even the idea of a personal God is difficult to accept. We are equal. Each person is a Buddha. The idea of a supreme God is difficult for them. But from my point of view, I find it very difficult to see how one could be a religious person without a concept of God. ..it is a mystery.

The concept of a personal God explains questions like creation, the destiny of human life, religious feeling and so on. How do Buddhists answer questions like these? Or do they even ask these question?

Most do not accept the concept of creation. I ask how then the world exists. For me the world exists and so I must look for the cause, but for the Buddhists, it is not necessary to ask. This I find very curious. But on the other hand, I find re-incarnation very hard to accept, but for them it seems so natural.

Are they avoiding the question?

Surely they have this question, but their own answer is satisfactory for them, but not for me. We are friends, we can talk, but on this question not...I don't know why.

Are there other questions like this for which answers are difficult to find?

Yes. For example, don't kill animals or living being. For us, we can do

it to eat, but for them, there is no right to kill living things to satisfy human needs...the animals are equal to us. However, the Buddhist personal and family morals are very close to ours. We have ten commandments, but they have a lot more, especially for nuns, more severe than for monks. There are many regulations governing their life.

Is your dialogue mainly with monastic Buddhism?

No, also with lay-people. Very nice people. There is a difference between the modern and ancient lay people. Modern people are more open, more involved in social action together, and it is easier to talk with them. The doctrine is the same for lay people as it is for the monastery, but the mind and thinking are different.

Is there a renewal or revival of Buddhism in Taiwan?

Yes, it seems more active now; the monasteries have vocations, activities, magazines and so on. Students can spend two or three months in a monastery living totally like a monk and after that they are free. In the universities they have Buddhist associations for the students.

Is this renewal bringing about a change in people's lives and spirituality?

Yes. Different Buddhist methods are now becoming popular. One method is seeking; the second method is sitting...the Buddhist method of sitting in silence, the Buddhist method of respiration...these are very common now in Taipei. Even important persons in Government spend a day, a week, or ten days in a kind of a retreat. This is accepted by the people so there is a renewal. Mons. Lo-kuang says that the Buddhists appeal to the people and the Catholics do not because we do not have this practice of sitting, of meditating in silence. We conduct retreats, yes, especially with explanations and theory, but without the personal engagement and without sitting in silence.

Do the Buddhists have anything equivalent to the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius?

It depends on the master and on the school of Buddhism. The school of Chan, for example, doesn't explain many things, but you must stay sitting there for hours and hours. The master gives some very simple points but the idea is not to think about things but to absorb them by the heart and mind without words, like the water is soaked up little by little. There is no stress on ideas or theory. Just look at yourself, discover yourself. They do not pray to an exterior God. Recently there was a Catholic retreat preached by a lay person named Liu Chiao-lin and she taught us this way to pray. Every day we had six or seven sittings and every sitting at least three quarter of an hour. It is very difficult to adopt this way. It is a passive way. We wait on God for his graces.

What about the Buddhist scholars. Are they welcoming of dialogue?

More and more so. We find that we are always welcome by the Buddhists. We say we are in the same boat. We go to the same destination. You take this direction, I take that direction. According to their theory, in the past lives we were good friends so in this life we can talk very freely and in a friendly way. This is not by accident. Friendship becomes the base and we avoid stress on the differences. We have many common things and we should focus on these. We can talk about the environment, about cooperation in the social sphere, about the interior life...etc.

Can you say something about the more socially active Buddhists?

I think it is very good. It is a new form of Buddhism, especially on this large scale, such as in the field of education, schools and hospitals. I have interviewed the Buddhist nun Cheng-Yan in Hualien and asked about her interior life. I said I thought it would be very difficult for her to cultivate the interior life given the level of involvement in social action. She agreed that it was not easy, but she has her basic principles: Compassion, patience, generosity, sacrifice of self. She finds Buddha in everything just as Ignatius found God in everything.

Is there any conflict between compassion and strict discipline that is called for in the monastic life?

No, it goes smoothly, but according to love. In the monastery they are strict and sometimes they punish the monks. They have a kind of fraternal correction...In the refectory they don't make noise... The strength to do this comes from the interior heart.

What about inter-Buddhist dialogue?

They say we have many schools in Buddhism. Like water, each one has its way to go to the sea. Finally, all arrive at the sea. Theoretically there are differences in interpretation and explanation, but no tension. Every school and community is independent. For instance, I have an idea to start a university; so have you; so has he; and so we end up with three universities. There seems to be a great deal of duplication. On the other hand, the independence does seem to give rise to a large outpouring of creativity.

Have you learnt anything from your dialogue encounters that has helped you to correct something neglected in Christianity?

Yes. For example, passivity during prayer. Ordinarily we have a more active approach to meditation. However, the Oriental Church was probably closer with, for example, the Jesus prayer.

The Catholic Church in Taiwan is dying and Buddhism seems to be growing. Is this in

any way related to the Oriental-Occidental question?

I think one of the reasons is the difference between the Western people and the Eastern people. For example, if in preaching a retreat you give some quotation from Confucius or Lao Tzu, the people's faces light up and they seem to say "this is ours". But if you quote St. Augustine or St. John of the Cross, while it may be more meaningful and profound, it does not stir the people's sentiment in the same way. They feel that Confucius is 'our treasure'. Confucius said a lot and that is what the people like to hear. It goes back to the roots of the way of living here. For example, the nun Ching Hai quotes a lot from Chinese Classics as well as from Jesus and Buddha. The people really like this. She strikes a chord in the ordinary people.

Is it the content of what she says that attracts followers ?

It's not just a question of dogma; the style of life is also very important. They spend two and a half hours in prayer every day. This is amazing.

And your hopes for the future?

If we have more people engaged in dialogue, and not only priests and nuns, but also lay-people, then we can hope to be in contact with not only Buddhists, but also Taoists and the new religions. With more people and more involvement, we will learn and maybe we will give something too. I think the internal life will be better as a result.