

Buddhist-Christian Encounter and Dialogue: a critical, contextual approach.

Elizabeth J. Harris

Birmingham University

I begin this presentation by stressing that it is impossible to isolate one model or one pattern of Buddhist-Christian encounter. Each encounter in the past and the present has been or is being conditioned by different factors such as geographical location, colonial history, power relations, politics and the school of Buddhism or Christianity involved. I would like to take two illustrative examples of this: Buddhist-Christian encounter in nineteenth century colonial Sri Lanka, a context that has formed an important part of my academic research; the latter part of the twentieth century. I will end with a significant current development.

Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Sri Lanka in Nineteenth Century Colonial Sri Lanka

Buddhist-Christian encounter in nineteenth century colonial Sri Lanka was conditioned by the imperial policies of the British, which held power in Sri Lanka from 1796 to 1948, and the presence of evangelical Protestant Christian missionaries, from independent missionary societies, who sought to proselytise through undermining Buddhism. Before 1796, Sri Lanka had experienced the Portuguese and the Dutch. Research into the Dutch period reveal that, although Buddhists developed a critique of the Christianity of their conquerors, expressed in folk tales that represented Christians as uncivilized beef-eaters and Jesus as the son of a demon (Young & Senanayaka 1998), they did not experience contempt for Buddhism. Christian baptism was necessary for government employment under the Dutch. Dutch schools taught Christian catechisms. But the Dutch did not insist on Sri Lankan Buddhists rejecting Buddhist practice when they were baptised. A form of dual belonging emerged, with Christianity being linked with civic necessities.

In the British period, archival evidence suggests that the principle at work among Buddhists was that when courtesy was shown towards Buddhism, courtesy would be returned but if contempt was shown, defensive action would be returned. Some Christian British civil

servants studied Buddhism or Pali and, to these, Buddhists always showed respect.¹ If Buddhists had only met Christians of this type in the nineteenth century, Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka would be very different. The evangelical Protestant missionaries, however, were driven by the conviction that converting Buddhists to Christianity saved their souls from an eternity in hell, and converts were expected to utterly reject all Buddhist practice and Buddhist symbolism when they converted. Utter contempt was shown to Buddhist practice.

When the missionaries first arrived, archival evidence shows that the majority of Buddhists sought a respectful and pragmatic co-existence with the missionaries, although there was some resistance to Christian schools. Some missionaries visited their *vihāras* (monasteries or temples) to talk about Buddhism, learnt Pali from Buddhist monks and even received gifts of Buddhist manuscripts. However, their aim was to preach against Buddhism and Buddhists soon realized this. The missionaries, for instance, openly condemned the concepts of rebirth and karma - the Principle of Action in Buddhism – and claimed that the Sinhala practice of exorcism was satanic.

This and the building of churches and Christian schools, through which the missionaries sought to create exclusivist, christianized space, forced Buddhists to see that the missionaries threatened the existence of Buddhism. But Buddhists did not immediately turn to polemic. One early act of resistance was to send petitions to the British authorities, objecting to missionary methods and suggesting a code of conduct based on respect (Harris 2006: 197; Harris 2012a: 291). When this failed, some Buddhist monks wrote reasoned responses to Christian accusations against Buddhism, which they took from village to village on traditional ola leaves (Young & Somaratna 1996: 66).

Mid-century, however, several factors combined to increase Buddhist defensive activism. First, missionaries with scholarly knowledge of Buddhism published refutations of Buddhism that demanded a response, for example the Wesleyan, Daniel Gogerly. Second, Buddhists

¹ For instance, George Turnour (1799-1843), Robert Childers (1838-1876), T. W Rhys Davids (1843-1922) and John Frederick Dickson, who worked in Sri Lanka between 1859 and 1885. See Harris 2006 for an examination of their work.

gained printing presses in 1855 and 1862, which enabled the speedy publication of more populist anti-Christian tracts. Third, revivalist Buddhist leaders arose, such as Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda, who, in 1862, founded the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism, echoing the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Malalgoda 1976: 220). Buddhist-Christian debates also took place, the last of which was at Pānadurē in 1873. In this process, Buddhists moved from using reason to counter Christianity to using polemic. For instance, Guṇānanda, at the Pānadurē Debate, threw missionary accusations against Buddhism back at Christianity, arguing that not Buddhists but Christians had a religion that was linked with demonism. Why else, he argued, could a murderer, Moses, or a being whose birth was accompanied by the killing of children, Jesus, be revered? (Young & Somaratna 1996, cited in Harris 2006: 202-203; Harris 2012a: 299).

With the Pānadurē debate, Buddhist-Christian relations in Sri Lanka reached the point when the Buddhist hope for reciprocated courtesy had been replaced by the reality of reciprocal demonization. Exclusivism had engendered exclusivism. Polemic had engendered polemic. This reciprocal demonization continued after the debate. There is no time in this presentation to examine the development of this, except to say that it culminated in the writings of the Buddhist revivalist Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), who condemned Christianity as 'unsuited for a civilised Aryan community' (Harris 2006: 204) and argued that the God of Judaism and Christianity was violent and capricious (Guruge 1991: 409).²

My first cameo, therefore, demonstrates that open conflict between Buddhism and Christianity is possible when one side to the encounter chooses contempt rather than respect towards Buddhism. A similar dynamic developed in Myanmar, which also came under British imperial rule. It is a legacy that continues to influence those parts of Buddhist Asia that experienced colonialism or that, in the present, experience independent evangelical Christian missionaries from different parts of the world. In 2015, for instance, I attended a Buddhist-Christian consultation in Bangkok. There was one representative from Cambodia there. Almost the only contribution she made to plenary discussions was to ask the question,

² See for instance his unpublished diary, 4th December 1891 (accessed at the Maha Bodhi Society Headquarters, Colombo), cited in Harris 2013: 108.

‘Why do Christians always want to convert Buddhists?’ It has led to the passing or tabling of anti-conversion legislation in some countries (Owens 2007)

The Twentieth Century

By the mid-twentieth century, however, new contexts were conditioning Buddhist-Christian encounter. European imperialism had diminished and Christianity in Buddhist Asia was adopting new, indigenized forms. Immigration of Buddhists to both Europe and America had increased and more westerners were converting to Buddhism, some becoming Buddhist monks and nuns. For instance, Dennis Lingwood, ordained as Sangharakshita in India, returned to Britain to form the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in 1967 and the Western Buddhist Order in 1968, now called the Triratna Community. Generally speaking, these new contexts nurtured more positive forms of Buddhist-Christian encounter, although it must be pointed out that some western converts to Buddhism did not want dialogue with the theistic religions they had rejected.

The changed context was seen in Japan, where two Jesuit priests, the German Hugo M. Enomiya Lassalle (1898-1990) and the Japanese J. Kakichi Kadowaki (b. 1930) were discovering that Zen meditation could contribute positively to Christian spirituality. Their books on this, published in the 1970s, influenced Roman Catholics globally, leading to Zen Buddhist practice entering the spiritual practice of some western Christians.³ Eventually this would lead to some Christians claiming dual belonging, namely that they were 100% Christian and 100% Zen Buddhist.

In Sri Lanka, a group of indigenous Christians sought to roll back the mistrust of the colonial period. It included the Methodist, Lynn de Silva (1918- 1982), the Anglican Yohan Devananda (1928-2016; Anglican), the Jesuit Aloysius Pieris (b. 1934) and the Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Michael Rodrigo (1927-1987). Again, there is no time to examine their work in detail but these pioneers not only called Buddhists into formal dialogue but also demonstrated empathy for Buddhist ritual and practice through a dialogue of spirituality. Devananda, for instance, established an ashram with a spiritual practice that was consciously

³ Kadowaki wrote *Zen and the Bible*, in the 1970s, first translated into English for publication in 1980 (Routledge and Kegan Paul). In 2002, Orbis (Maryknoll, New York) re-published it. Enomiya Lassalle, in 1974, published *Zen Meditation for Christians*.

modelled to be in harmony with Buddhist practice, and Pieris developed liturgies that combined Christian and Buddhist insights. Their legacy continues to the present, transforming Buddhist perceptions of Christians in Sri Lanka (Harris 2016).

In Europe and the USA, a significant initiative arose in 1980 when David Chappell (1940-2004), a Christian who identified as a Buddhist later in his life (Chappell 2005), began the East-West Project, from the University of Hawai'i. It organised academic conferences that brought Buddhists and Christians together and started a journal. A Japan chapter of the project began in 1982, becoming the Japan Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. At its 1987 conference at Berkeley, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies was formed, which, to the present, has pioneered new forms of academic dialogue and exchange between Buddhism and Christianity, through conferences, its journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, other publications and, more latterly, its website. In 1997, a similar organisation began in Europe, the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, the main activity of which is a biennial conference with invited speakers on a theme central to Buddhist-Christian Studies, the papers of which are published. The topics covered in these conferences have included Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus, Christian Perceptions of the Buddha, Creation, Conversion, History as a Challenge to Buddhists and Christians, Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia, and, this year, the role of meditation in Buddhist-Christian Encounter.

Out of this less polemical, less imperialistic context, fruitful expressions of Buddhist-Christian encounter, therefore, have arisen. At the same time, inter-monastic dialogue and joint social activism between Buddhists and Christians were developing. The main pioneer of modern inter-monastic dialogue was the American Christian Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Merton became deeply interested in Eastern spirituality and experienced what I would call an epiphany, an encounter with ultimate reality, in Polonnaruva, Sri Lanka, at the magnificent Gal Vihara, where mammoth images of the Buddha and his companion Ananda are carved into rock. This was shortly before he died tragically and accidentally at a meeting of Inter-Monastic Aid (AIM), a Christian body, in Bangkok in 1968, at which he had encouraged his monastic colleagues, 'to devote themselves to serious engagement with the spiritual riches of the East' (Blée 2011: 27, cited in Harris 2013: 114). His challenge was taken up posthumously in the form of inter-monastic exchanges. In 1973, AIM convened a

consultation between Christian and Buddhist monks, which resulted in a series of East-West Spiritual Exchanges between Zen and Christian monks. Two Commissions for inter-monastic dialogue were then formed in 1978, one based in North America, focussing on the Tibetan tradition, and the other based in Belgium and France, focussing on Zen. Inter-monastic dialogue has now become firmly established within Christian monasticism, both in Asia and the West, and there is now an on-line, international journal, *Dilatato Corde*.⁴ Buddhists have generally responded with courtesy to this largely Christian initiative. On the evidence of the newsletters produced by the Commissions, many benefitted, some expressing surprise that Christianity had greater depth than they had imagined.

As for social activism, Buddhism has always stressed the importance of compassionate action to address suffering in society. Yet, the Buddhism that travelled to the West sometimes overlooked this, giving greater stress to the importance of meditation. In this context, some Buddhists both in Asia and the West started to use the term, 'Engaged Buddhism' to stress that Buddhists should be addressing contemporary issues connected with poverty, war and suffering. The Vietnamese monk, Thich Naht Hanh, and the Siamese lay person Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933), with others, founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in 1989. What is significant for this paper is that Engaged Buddhists have both worked with Christians and drawn on Christianity and Judaism for inspiration. For instance, western Buddhist feminist, Rita Gross (1943-2015), claimed, in her pioneering book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, that 'the prophetic voice' had been missing in Buddhism, namely the voice that named inequalities and social injustices and tried to do something about them. She realised that she was drawing on Christian and Jewish tradition, and welcomed it (Gross 1993: 133-135). Similarly, Thich Naht Hanh, was influenced by Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton, when he was in America at the time of the Vietnam War. As a result, in the twentieth century, Buddhists and Christians found themselves side by side in anti-nuclear demonstrations, in chaplaincies, in ecological movements and in peace marches.

The Contemporary Moment

⁴ See www.dimmid.org

I will turn now to what I consider to be a significant contemporary development – exploration into the similarities between the Christian mystics, particularly those connected with the hesychastic Eastern Orthodox tradition and Buddhist meditation. This has emerged out of contemporary interest in spirituality, meditation and mindfulness. Meister Eckhart has long been appreciated by Buddhists because of his contemplative spirit. And some Buddhists have come to see that the Christian concept of God could have parallels in the non-theistic Buddhist tradition. To cite just one example, Ayya Khema (1923-1997), a German-born convert to Buddhism, addressed the Eckhart Society towards the end of her life and stated, ‘In the course of talking on the comparison between Christianity and Buddhism and engaging in ecumenical dialogue, I have come to the conclusion that God (or Godhead) and Nibbāna are identical – that they cannot be anything else’ (Ayya Khema 1996: 45, cited in Harris 2013: 110). This kind of insight is now being built on further. This year, in Spain, a conference was held on the spiritual practice of Teresa of Avila and Buddhism. The European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies conference this year had one session on the touching points between Eastern Orthodox contemplative practice and Buddhism. Numerous parallels were highlighted in terms of how both traditions work with the mind and the emotions. I have a postgraduate student who is comparing the writings of the Christian monastic ascetic, Evagrius of Pontus with the Theravāda Buddhist meditation manual, the *Vimuttimaggā*. And recently I wrote an article that compared the Buddhist *jhāna* – meditative absorptions – with the contemplative practice of St John of the Cross, teacher of Teresa of Avila. I thoroughly enjoyed the study and came to the conclusion that, although the two traditions used different vocabulary about metaphysics, they moved in the same landscape when it came to working with the senses and the mind. This is an exciting area in Buddhist-Christian encounter.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have surveyed two historical periods in Buddhist-Christian encounter and have briefly touched on one area that is attracting contemporary interest. I have argued that context is all-important. Where there is mutual respect and an equal playing field between religions, what some scholars have termed ‘interreligious learning’ can take place. I believe this is happening in the West between Buddhists and Christians and in some parts of Asia, although tension still exists in some contexts.

Bibliography

- Ayya Khema, 1996. 'Mysticism is no Mystery'. *Eckhart Review*, Spring 1996: 44-57.
- Blée, Fabrice (William Skudlarek with Mary Grady transls.), 2011. *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- Chappell, David W., 2005. 'Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World'. *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 25: 9-14.
- Dharmapāla, Anagārika, 1991. 'The Repenting God of Horeb'. In Guruge 1991: 401- 425.
- Peter Lang.
- Gross, Rita M., 1993. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Guruge, Ananda (ed.), 1991 (1965). *Return to Righteousness: a collection of speeches, essays and letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. Colombo: Ministry of Social Affairs.
- Harris, Elizabeth J., 2006. *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, missionary and colonial experience in nineteenth century Sri Lanka*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.
- Harris, Elizabeth J., 2012. 'Memory, Experience and the Clash of Cosmologies: The Encounter between British Protestant Missionaries and Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka' in *Social Sciences and Mission*. 25.3: 265-303.
- Harris, Elizabeth J., 2016. 'Art, Liturgy and the Transformation of Memory: Christian Rapprochement with Buddhism in Post-Independence Sri Lanka'. *Religions of South Asia* 10.1: 54-82.
- Malalgoda, Kitsiri, 1976. *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1800: a Study of Religious Revival and Change*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Owens, Alexandra, 2007. 'Using Legislation to Protect against Unethical Conversions in Sri Lanka'. *Journal of Law and Religion*, XII: 323-351.
- Young, Richard F. & G. S. B. Senanayaka, 1998. *The Carpenter-Heretic: A Collection of Buddhist Stories about Christianity from 18th Century Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Karunaratne Sons.

Young, Richard F. & G.P.V. Somaratna, 1996. *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*. Publications of the De Nobili Research Institute, Vol. 23, Vienna: University of Vienna.