

Bhikkhu Buddhadasaⁱ: “Interfaith Understanding in the Buddhist-Christian Dialogueⁱⁱ “



Interfaith understanding is an understanding among members of different religions in order to save the world and live peacefully together. Interfaith understanding is crucial to the present world because it is the only means of fostering unity and an altruistic love of all humankind. Since human beings follow different religious doctrines and ways of life, it is necessary to try to understand one another in order to cooperate in building a more perfect world. Thus far, however, most people have believed that their own religion is the best and the only way to salvation. Such an attitude contradicts all valid religious principles and tends to generate more evil and defilements in the human mind than already exist.

In fact, all religions provide spiritual support. They are founded and exist in order to eliminate human selfishness and to help resist materialistic domination. On the other hand, modern technology and development are conducive to materialistic growth and not to spiritual enlightenment. They empower base human instincts, selfishness, and capitalism since their primary concern is to provide human life with convenience and affluence. Thus, religions are necessary to counteract this negative influence of materialism. And their protective power can be strengthened by interfaith understanding.

In order to understand other religions, one should be reminded that the world is composed of various kinds of people, cultural bases, and ways of life leading to numerous sets of beliefs and practices. Thus, there must be more than one religion in the world. The religions of the world today can be classified into three categories, namely, religions of faith, religions of spiritual discipline, and religions of wisdom.

Religions of faith demand from their members a faith in a supernatural force and authority. This is the primordial form of those religions in world history where human beings, confronted with their unknown nature, sought divine assistance. In those days, human

beings believed in a countless number of divine beings and participated in many religious rites. In addition, they believed in anthropomorphic gods/God. Due to their narrow experiences and misconceptions, they could not understand God as an impersonal force or as the law of nature. And since humankind still lacks true knowledge of all phenomena, religions of faith can therefore prevail even in the world today. Religions of spiritual discipline laud and commend moral authority. They encourage spiritual discipline through following certain moral rules; for example, the rule of altruistic practices such as loving kindness and compassion.

Religions of wisdom propagate the use of wisdom in searching for the truth of nature and as the only means toward salvation. The followers of the religions of wisdom usually believe only in things verified by their own wisdom. As to the theory of creation, they tend to believe in the law of nature rather than in the Divine Creator. Moreover, they do not literally interpret their scriptures but try to understand their essential meaning.

Those who believe in a religion of faith and/or religion of spiritual discipline can be called "creationists." They believe in the Divine Creator. Those who prefer the religion of wisdom, on the other hand, can be called "evolutionists." They hold that the law of nature is the only source of all creation and evolution. Though Christians are generally "creationists" and Buddhists are normally "evolutionists," they can cooperate very well in the saving and building of the modern world. This is because the root of all the evils in the world today is human selfishness, and the essence of all religious teachings is particularly the eradication of selfishness and egoism. To put it differently, one should cultivate altruistic love in one's heart. One needs to be less selfish in order to love others more. Buddhism and Christianity share this same doctrine of altruistic love.

According to the Buddha, one should abstain from self-attachment and begin to cultivate loving kindness and compassion toward all beings. In addition, one should remind oneself of a Buddhist proverb: "Ahimsa- paramo dhammo" [nonaggression is the highest virtue]. If Buddhists properly understand the Buddha's teachings of altruistic love and self-detachment, they will not hold fast to the authority of their own religious doctrine and deny the truth of other religions. On the contrary, they will be able to take the Christian symbol of the Cross as the killing of I-ness or ego in the essential teaching of the Buddha. Moreover, they may admit that Buddhism is also a theistic religion. God in Buddhism, however, is not anthropomorphic but is the law of nature that creates and governs the universe. The law of nature, in the light of Buddhism, mandates that all beings should do their own duty in order to live peacefully and properly in the world. If they abandon their duty, they will destroy both nature and themselves. In other words, one should cultivate altruistic love and live peacefully with others in order to fulfill one's duty as a world-creature.

The law of nature is thusness (tathatā). It embraces everything and does not differentiate good from evil. It has neither beginning nor end. It is as it is. By means of self-detachment, one can attain the true meaning of the law of nature and see it as it is. Consequently, one will be able to transcend positivism and negativism; that is, one can see the unity of the whole world and not be attached to either good or evil.

Similarly, Christianity propagates the doctrine of altruistic love and unselfishness. The Cross symbolizes the destruction of selfishness. According to the Bible, human beings can be reconciled with God through the Crucifixion and their acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Savior. To put it differently, if a Christian destroys his/her I-ness, s/he can return to God. In addition, like Buddhism, the Christian doctrine encourages humankind to follow the law of nature and live beyond positivism and negativism. According to the Old Testament, God forbade Adam and Eve to eat the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The story must be taken beyond its literal meaning. Essentially, it indicates that the law of nature, which is the supreme law, commands human beings to live beyond good and evil; that is, to not be attached to values in order to avoid the rise of egoism and be able to live peacefully with others.

Christians should understand the notion of God properly. Some say that God is dead since the world is full of evil and misery. The true God, the law of nature, however, never dies. This world is the best possible world ever created by God. Yet, it is full of evil and sorrow because of human selfishness. Since Buddhism and Christianity share the essential doctrine of peace and love for all beings, Buddhists and Christians should join together in order to fight against [these] evils of the world. They should set aside the literal, superficial meanings of their scriptures and try to recover the essence of their doctrines. Whenever they can overcome their selfishness and egoism, they can attain interfaith understanding and attain peace on earth.

ⁱ The venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who passed away at the age of eighty-seven on July 8, 1993, was perhaps the best-known and most controversial Thai monk in the contemporary Theravada tradition.

Traditionalists attacked Buddhadasa because he regarded Mahayana as being as important as Theravada. He even questioned some remarks made by the most famous Theravada commentator, Buddhagosa. Besides, he praised authentic teaching in the Bible and the Quran. Buddhadasa taught that since Buddha was born in the forest, was enlightened in the forest, and passed away in the forest, we should really respect and preserve the forest. And since the word for a temple or monastery in Pali also means "forest" or "park," we should really live openly in natural surroundings.

In 1932, he established Suan Mokh, the Garden for Liberation. Here he sat all day beneath the trees, surrounded by dogs and chickens, birds and bees, contemplating deeply. Donald K. Swearer has called him the Nagarjuna of Theravada.

Some of his works have been translated into several languages. Those in English are *Handbook for Mankind*, *Mindfulness with Breathing: Unveiling the Secrets of Life*, *BuddhaDhamma for Students*, *Keys to Natural Truth*, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: the Buddha's Teaching of Voidness*, and *The Buddha's Doctrine of Not-Self*.

(From obituary by Sulak Sivaraksa in: <http://www.tricycle.com/general/in-transition-onpassing-buddhadasa>)

ⁱⁱ Buddhadasa's special lecture at Suan Mokkha in Southern Thailand on April 23, 1987, is translated and edited by Pataraporn Sirikan-chana, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand.