Buddhist - Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls
Conference Summary by Mark Berkson

In this issue of Pacific Rim Report we are pleased to provide a summary of the main points presented by invited speakers at a public conference sponsored by the University of San Francisco (USF) Center for the Pacific Rim and its Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History on May 8, 1998 at the USF campus in San Francisco.

Entitled “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls,” the conference was chaired by Mark Berkson, a 1998 Kiriyama Visiting Fellow at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim, adjunct faculty member in USF’s Master’s Program in Asia Pacific Studies, and Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University in religious studies and humanities.

We wish to thank the following students in the Center for the Pacific Rim’s Master’s Program in Asia Pacific Studies who helped organize the “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue” conference and contributed to this summary as Union Bank of California research fellows at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim: Joan Lee, Elisa Oreglia, and Francis Schortgen.

We gratefully acknowledge the Kiriyama Chair for Pacific Rim Studies at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim and Union Bank of California for funding the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Project and this issue of Pacific Rim Report. If you would like to subscribe to Pacific Rim Report, please email us.

Despite the fact that Buddhists and Christians have encountered each other many times in various cultures over the last two millennia, it is only in this century, and largely in the United States, that members of both traditions have engaged in a sustained dialogue aimed at deepening mutual understanding. In fact, we can say that the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is still in its relative infancy. One of the earliest benchmark meetings occurred in the 1950s between Hisamatsu Shin’ichi and Paul Tillich at Harvard, where the two thinkers struggled for three sessions to understand each other’s tradition better. Since that time the dialogue has developed and expanded, benefiting from the contributions of thinkers such as Christian theologian John Cobb and the Kyoto School Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe. With a debt to these pioneers, but also looking toward the future and exploring new modes of encounter, the University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim and its Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History convened a conference entitled “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls” on May 8, 1998.

The meeting ground of different religious traditions has frequently been littered with misunderstanding, violence, claims of superiority, and attempts at conversion. In an ever-shrinking and increasingly interdependent world, and particularly in an America characterized by religious pluralism and multiculturalism, we must build bridges of understanding through dialogue in order to avoid these tragic mistakes of the past and to create a future where we not only tolerate other traditions, but appreciate and learn from them. Through such an encounter, we as individuals, and the traditions to which we belong, will be transformed. Since Buddhism is one of the fastest growing traditions in the United States, this process is already under way. Not only are the practitioners of both traditions often living side by side within the same community (particularly in a place such as the Bay Area), they may be members of the same family. The traditions may even come together within the same individual, who might use a self-description such as “Zen Christian” or “Catholic Buddhist.”

The purposes of this conference were to 1) understand what is at work and what is at stake in the process of Buddhist-Christian encounter (a descriptive and analytic task); 2) discuss and demonstrate the methods, topics, and approaches that make for the most fruitful interfaith encounter (an evaluative and normative task); and 3) explore general issues in comparative religion and cross-cultural encounter. The latter focus was on comparisons between a tradition with Asian origins and one with Near Eastern origins, both of which have undergone significant transformations as they have taken root in other cultures and adapted to new historical circumstances. In the process, we hoped to gain a deeper understanding of issues surrounding religious belief and practice; truth, meaning and interpretation; religious identity; and continuity and change within traditions.

The conference brought together scholars and practitioners of Buddhist and Christian traditions in an encounter that was academically stimulating and personally and spiritually enriching for those involved. The participants included individuals with extensive experience in the dialogue as well as a number of new voices. The conference critiqued previous and ongoing efforts at dialogue and also took the dialogue itself in new directions. While Buddhist-Christian dialogue of the past has often focused on comparative doctrine, involving theological issues...
and comparative beliefs, the University of San Francisco conference focused instead on comparative practice, an approach that was quite productive. The practices explored included monasticism, pilgrimage, bowing, meditation, renunciation, social action and — of particular relevance to the overall project of interfaith encounter — the practice of dialogue itself and the methods and virtues necessary to carry it out successfully.

**Comparative Practice**

In the first of three panels, the following questions were central: Despite the differences that exist in metaphysics, doctrine, and world view between the traditions, are there certain practices which, because they are shared, point to some deep commonalities among the traditions? What is the relation of belief to both the interpretation of practice and to the experience itself? Can a tradition authentically incorporate the practices of another tradition? What obstacles are involved in the process?

The first speaker, Sister Mary Margaret Funk, executive director of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and a Benedictine prioress, presented a paper entitled “Monastic Practice: Views of the Mind.” Having spent a considerable amount of time in interreligious educational and spiritual exchanges, Sr. Funk was able to discuss her first-hand encounters with Buddhist monastic practice. She began by pointing out that despite many differences in beliefs, language, and worldview between the two traditions, monastics of these traditions “seem to share the same experience.” Describing her stay at a monastery in Trelokpur, India where she woke up next to a Buddhist altar, she said, “One may think that someone in that situation may be ill at ease, strangely disturbed or confused. But not so…there’s comfort, ease, peace and well-being in the situation. You see the differences are rich, distinct…but the experience was the same. We both [Benedictine and Buddhist monastics] had experienced the same purposes, aims, fruits, goals, and roles of the interior life of holiness.”

Sr. Funk focused on the theme of renunciation in monastic life and discussed three types of renunciation which Benedictine monastics undergo and which seem to resonate with the experience of Buddhist monastics. The first is the renunciation of the former way of life, where one moves away from “the designs of self-willed projects and works that serve to shore up the ego and make one’s own personality the main concern in life.” Then comes the renunciation of thoughts about the former way of life. Funk pointed out that while monastics might physically renounce their former life (e.g. move into a monastery), their thoughts, desires, and passions follow them. The final renunciation is to give up even thoughts, images, and mental constructs of God. Making a point that has important implications for interfaith dialogue, Sr. Funk noted that while we “need images of God and ways of praying that lead us to pure prayer, contemplation…once we’ve met God ‘face to face’ those images are obsolete or at least totally transformed into a ‘new way of seeing.’” She observed that these three renunciations “seem to be part of the fabric of all major religions.”

In discussing the second renunciation, she described the twelve monastic practices that aid in the process of working with one’s thoughts. Some of these, particularly ceaseless prayer (which “acts as a mantra”) and watchfulness of thoughts (“being aware of thoughts as they come and go”) resonate strongly with Buddhist mindfulness practices. She concluded, “The monastic practices that deal with the mind seem to be parallel tracks in both spiritualities. The observation of our thoughts, desires, and passions is a universal experience.” Making a point that was echoed by presenters Jim Fredericks and Mark Unno and experienced by the participants in the conference, she added, “Friendship sustains the dialogue.”

David Komito, an administrator at the University of San Francisco, a fellow at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim, and a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism discussed the practice of pilgrimage in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition of Tibet in his talk on “Teacher, Reliquary, Circumambulation.” He highlighted the significant role pilgrimage plays in the Dalai Lama’s prescription for harmony among religions, quoting His Holiness as advocating that “people of different religious traditions go on pilgrimages to visit one another’s holy places.” Komito then discussed the nature and function of the reliquary (stupa) and the development of the practice of pilgrimage in early Indian Buddhism. The questions that framed his talk included, “What would be the virtue of visiting a stupa (reliquary) and what would be the goal of travel?”

He pointed out that the answer to such questions depends on one’s philosophical or theological position because different schools of Buddhism often provide different answers. This comment raised an important point for the conference: we might look at Buddhists undertaking a particular practice, such as pilgrimage, and assume that they are doing the same thing, e.g. traveling to a place in a group, walking around that place, and returning home. Yet their experiences might be very different; in fact, pilgrims on the same journey who arrive at a sacred site may even be seeing different things while looking at one and the same object. The reason is that they might be framing, interpreting, and understanding the experience differently. If this is true among Buddhists, how much more so between Buddhists and Christians?

Komito reflected on the meaning of the experience for the practitioner, focusing on what it means to say that “seeing a stupa is seeing the Buddha.” He explored the complex interplay of belief and practice, literal and symbolic, mind and symbol. He included and analyzed the symbolism of the various parts of the stupa, including the relation among the concrete architecture, the symbolic meaning, and the Buddhist logic which connects them to each other and to the larger system of Buddhist thought and practice. He concluded, “In the fused literal/symbolic experience of the initiated pilgrim, circling the symbolic Buddha replicates turning the cyclic existence from which the Buddha liberated himself…Symbolically or literally, [the pilgrim] takes up the position of the stupa itself around which samsara circles, enacting the reality of his own nature as symbolized by the stupa.” Having done so, the pilgrim returns changed and brings something extraordinary back to ordinary life. Reminding us how much we bring to each experience (a point emphasized later by Anne Klein), Komito argued that the way each pilgrim understands or experiences the pilgrimage depends on his or her religious education and background.

The panel continued with a discussion of “Catholic Guides to Buddhist Practice” by Reverend Paul Bernadicou, S.J., chair of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at USF. Bernadicou discussed a number of Catholics who have experienced deep encounters with
Buddhism and incorporated Buddhist practice and insights into their own spiritual paths. Through this historical survey, he provided a context in which to understand the conference topic and also showed us the possibilities that lie in our own encounter with another tradition when we enter into genuine dialogue rather than looking to proselytize. The thinkers Fr. Bernadicou discussed include Thomas Merton, Aelred Graham, Heinrich Dumoulin, and Thomas Keating. The exploration of other traditions by Catholic thinkers was made possible, and in fact encouraged, by the Vatican Council II in the 1960s. The Council’s Declaration on Non-Christian Religions invited Catholic scholars to “acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among [the teachings of other traditions] as well as the values in their society and culture.”

Fr. Bernadicou’s presentation was filled with the inspiring words of these spiritual explorers, many of which resonate with the aims and approaches of this conference. For example, Aelred Graham wrote that the value of the religious encounter with Buddhism lay “not at the peripheral level of Catholic ecclesiology, which still preoccupies so many Catholic theologians, but at the basically existential level of who we are and what human life is all about.” Joseph Kadowaki, a Jesuit of Japanese origins, discussed the similarities between Zen monastic training and his own Jesuit novitiate training and wrote that practicing Zen allowed him to read the Bible in a new light.

Throughout his talk, Fr. Bernadicou focused on the way that Zen meditation practices have been integrated into the Christian path. He concluded with a quote from Merton that sounded a theme which echoed throughout the conference, “I think we have reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience.”

Reverend Heng Sure, director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, talked on “Humbling Pride: Buddhist Repentance Bowing.” Noting the centrality of bowing in Mahayana Buddhism, he discussed both the physical practice of bowing as well as its psychological and spiritual components. The act of bowing, he suggested, is used as an “effective means to reduce pride and penetrate the illusory view of the self.” Bowing is a “yoga,” a physical practice, which alters one’s orientation. As one lowers oneself, pride and arrogance are reduced; a layer of “self” is shed with each bow.

To provide the audience with a concrete example, he gave a lively and dramatic account of his nearly three-year “Three steps, one bow” pilgrimage, during which he made a full prostration to the ground every three steps along 800 miles of California coastline. The experience taught him a great deal about the mind. He said, “When you bow for a while, you discover the contents of your mind….The human mind acts very much like a sponge, recording everything that you put in front of your eyes, nose, tongue, ears, body and mind. When you let go of external sensory stimulation that we are forever pursuing or rejecting, those ‘tapes’ start playing back. You have your own personal tour of your ‘tape library.’ I never would have believed some of the things I could remember twenty years later…every song, movie conversation, every lie I told, appeared to my mind, fresh as the first time I told it and just as hard to endure.”

One particularly moving episode occurred in the city of Lincoln Heights. Although discouraged from bowing through the city due to the high rate of gang activities and urban crime, the group decided to move forward. As they bowed through the neighborhood, they were yelled at and harassed. Because they had received strict orders from their abbot to “use compassion, kindness, and joy to transform every state you encounter,” they simply continued with their practice. Then they began to notice a silence surrounding them. As he stopped at a red light to take a peek at what was going on, Rev. Heng Sure saw forty children following them — and bowing.

He continued his presentation by addressing the problems that many Westerners have with the practice of bowing and concluded that Mahayana Buddhists “saw in the practice of bowing not so much worship of idols or surrender of personal autonomy to an external religious authority, but…an effective means to reduce pride and penetrate the illusory view of the self.”

The Practice of Dialogue

The second panel examined issues surrounding the ongoing interreligious dialogue, including problems of interpretation, understanding, and meaning. Durwood Foster, professor emeritus at the Graduate Theological Union’s Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, provided an overview of the process of dialogue in his “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Progress and Problems.” He started by warning against common pitfalls that beset the dialogue, including “taking the particular for the general” (e.g. Zen for Buddhism, Lutheran for Christian); excluding underrepresented voices; expecting quick results; and “presumption about the other’s beliefs.” He then highlighted some deep commonalities between the two traditions, including “their boundless saving intentionality.”

Foster then provided a list of sticking points that create difficulty for the process of mutual understanding. These include the following pairs of concepts (where, depending on interpretation, the Buddhist concept might be incompatible with the Christian and might, in certain ways, be analogous or very similar): emptiness/God; compassion/agape; upaya (skillful means)/truth; nirvana/kingdom of God. Other points of contention were described as follows: Is the Christian doctrine of creation inherently elusive to Buddhists? Is “guilt consciousness” Christianly essential and Buddhistically meaningless? Does dualism genetically infect Christianity?

Foster recommended a “quadrilateral method” of dialogue in which scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are all engaged. He reminded us how “dynamically fluid are both Buddhist and Christian conceptuality,” meaning that the interpretation of these concepts might themselves change in the encounter between the traditions — a hermeneutical enterprise that Foster hopes “promises enhancement of life.”

Reverend Thomas Hand, director of the meditation program at Mercy Center in Burlingame and a self-described “Zen Christian,” provided a specific example of how this reinterpretive enterprise might work in his talk “Christ and Buddha: Facing the Millennium.” He cited a quote...
from Kevin O’Shea that provided the background for his reflections: “A new sense of Godness is arising in our cultural consciousness. Assertions about the femininity of God, and of change in God, are only steps along the way to a massive paradigm change about God, in which we are using our brains differently.” Using the text of the Mahayana Heart Sutra (in particular the lines “Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form”), Fr. Hand gave a thought-provoking interpretation of Buddhist notions of emptiness and form and Christian notions of the trinity, exploring how new light can be shed on each through an exploration of the other.

One of the patterns that emerges from the encounter of Buddhism and Christianity is “the coincidence of opposites [which] constitute the unified whole of reality.” On the Buddhist side, while emptiness (formlessness) and form are in one sense opposites, they are not entities (beings) but rather are both constituents of being. Formlessness and form are “the ultimate constituents of the unified whole which we call reality.” Fr. Hand then applied this understanding to the Christian notion of the trinity. The three of the trinity also must not be seen as beings but rather as constituents of Divine Being. Through a careful, complex interpretation, he connected the Buddhist and Christian understandings, stating that “the One God is Three, who are called Father (formless source), Son (universal form) and Holy Spirit (movement from the formless into form and back).” In this understanding, we see that the Triune God is undivided, a unified whole, and that “wherever God is, the Trinity is actively present as an undivided whole.” The latter can be understood as “panentheism,” expressed in Acts 17:8 with the words, “In God we live and move and have our being.” In the words of Fr. Hand, “We are nothing but the movement of formless/form manifesting individually.” He concluded that “in the above interpretations the Mahayana Buddhist and Christian viewpoints on reality complement each other and move toward a new paradigm.”

Taigen Daniel Leighton, a Soto Zen priest and scholar of Buddhism, in a talk entitled “Finding the Heart Through Another Tradition: How Buddhism is Informed by Christianity,” showed in a very practical way how Buddhism can benefit from an encounter with Christianity. He focused particularly on the ways that Buddhism can be enriched by incorporating elements of Christian teachings on social justice and Christian devotional practices. Drawing on his own experience, Taigen noted that “one can respectfully try on participation in practices of a spiritual tradition that is different from one’s own.” By doing so, “we can discover a new perspective on our own tradition.”

Regarding the teachings on social justice, Taigen praised Christian social action for its “strong commitment and dedication to social justice and righteousness.” The Christian notion that God acts in history to oppose injustice and oppression energizes Christian approaches to social transformation. While such notions resonate with the movement of “engaged Buddhism” and the spirit of the bodhisattva, the Buddhist approach is framed in terms of nondualism, the idea of karma, an emphasis on ignorance as the primary problem (rather than evil), and a stance of nonjudgment. Taigen explained how we can work towards an effective combination of the Christian intensity of commitment with the Buddhist approach grounded in meditative calm and an understanding of the workings of karma.

Taigen went on to suggest ways in which American Buddhists might learn from Christian expressions of “the devotional impulse.” Although many Euro-American Buddhists emphasize the meditative, contemplative aspects of Buddhism, Taigen reminded us that “most of Buddhism has a strong devotional element, even when it is not emphasized.” While Buddhism has its own forms of devotion (e.g. veneration of the lineage of ancestors, petition of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas), Buddhists could benefit from observing Christian forms of worship and prayers of praise, which express the “sense of wonder and gratitude that seem to have a central place in all religious sensibility.” Taigen concluded, “I believe we can learn from each other how to more deeply connect with our own spiritual truths.”

Dialogue as Religious Practice

The final panel of the conference examined how the process of engaging in dialogue itself can be seen as a part of one’s religious path. One thread that ran through all three talks in this panel is our need to cultivate certain virtues (excellences of character) in order to participate in interfaith encounter most fruitfully and ultimately to live well in an increasingly pluralistic world. Professor Lee Yearley of Stanford University in his talk on “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and New Religious Virtues” began by pointing out four ways that adherents of religious traditions have historically looked at persons who belong to another tradition: seeing the adherents of the other tradition as “in error,” as “less developed,” as “more developed,” and “only apparently different.” Each of these positions required the proponents to manifest certain virtues.

After showing that virtues can be “era specific,” Yearly showed another possibility by providing an account of a new religious virtue, “spiritual regret,” which he argued “concerns the appropriate response to the recognition that extremely varied, legitimate religious ideals exist and that no person can possibly manifest all of them.” This virtue, which requires the training of the imagination, combines a deep appreciation and enjoyment of the goods represented in the view of another tradition, along with a sadness that, due to our facticity and the need to maintain integrity of the self, we will never be able to realize these goods in our own lives.

We begin with the understanding that our way of life, our vision of the good, is only one among many. Yearley said the notion “that a person who desires to possess integrity affirms only one among the different kinds of human excellence he or she could affirm lies at the center of spiritual regret….People must both encounter goods that draw them and encounter their own integrity, an integrity that makes impossible a full acceptance of the alternative good.” His talk provided a corrective to an overoptimistic approach to dialogue that overlooks human limitation and genuine differences among legitimate goods.

Professor Jim Fredericks of Loyola Marymount University further developed the theme of important virtues in a pluralistic age in his paper on “Interreligious Friendship as a Theological Virtue.” Fredericks began with a theoretical discussion of virtues, emphasizing that they have a history (are defined in response to changing historical situations) and can function as correctives to human weaknesses. He gave a specific example in his discussion of the importance of friendship with someone of another religious tradition and explored the virtues that are required
He emphasized the notion of love captured by philia, preferential love that requires a bond of reciprocal affection, rather than agape, unconditional love which is steadfast in the face of rejection. While agape may provide the basis for religious tolerance, philia moves us beyond this to a place where our lives may be transformed by the concrete “other.” Reminding us that “lying within every encounter with the stranger is a potential for discovery,” Fredericks proceeded to discuss how an act of befriending someone with a different way of understanding and being in the world can decenter our ego, expand our horizons, and “draw us out of ourselves and into a world significantly different from our presuppositions.”

Fredericks stressed the importance of honoring differences within the friendship and warned against a “surrender to the other.” He showed how interreligious friendships help us understand more deeply the other faith and overcome our fear of “the other.” He commented, “The virtue of interreligious friendship assists Christians in taking their actual experience of other religious believers as the prime locus for our thinking about the diversity of religions and not the caricatures of popular prejudices, and not the abstract universals of pluralist philosophies, which no actual religious believer would recognize as her own.” Through interreligious friendship we can develop “a form of resistance,” to borrow David Tracy’s term, that corrects the inconsistencies of our own faith and supports us in resisting the temptation to domesticate demanding truths of our own religion. Fredericks concluded by describing how “the truths of a religion not my own can become for me theological resources for revising my own religious self-understanding.”

Professor Mark Unno of Carleton College opened his talk on “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: By Whom and For Whom?” by stating, “We may talk about Buddhist ideas and Christian ideas in abstraction, but the real significance is, I believe, in the one-to-one encounter.” Unno highlighted how critical reflection on Buddhist self-understanding must be undertaken in light of non-Buddhist discourse (e.g. Christian, feminist, psychotherapeutic) while remaining within a perspective grounded in Buddhist tradition. Both a centeredness within a tradition and an openness to the insights of other ways of thinking are necessary for what Unno calls a “critical synergy” to emerge. He argued that “constructive religious thought must be responsive to the complex challenges of a multicultural world.” This approach leads to the following central questions: How can one be responsive to the great diversity of human life, religious or otherwise, without losing the normative force of his or her own Buddhism? Is there a way of becoming responsive in a manner that expands the horizons of Buddhist theology rather than rendering it ineffectual and self-enclosed?

Unno indicated three possible strategies that adherents might take — conservative retreat, progressive reform, and “constructive bricolage,” which entails the creative intellectual task of weaving together from one’s social and conceptual inheritances a pattern that “is provisional and created to meet the needs of the moment.” Unno himself “tends to combine all three,” guided by the notion of upaya, or skillful means, which aims at alleviating suffering and bringing about liberation. He shows how Buddhists can apply non-attachment even to their own religious concepts, which would lead to an openness to the truths revealed by other traditions. Drawing on the Vimalakirti Sutra, which states that the ultimate truth of emptiness “should be sought in…heretical teachings,” Unno said, “Where should a Buddhist look for his or her truth? Look for it in Christianity, Islam, feminist discourse…in all discourses in the diversity of this world.” He concluded by pointing out that Buddhist compassion “doesn’t come from some abstract place, it comes concretely through living beings….It is by engaging in the difficult task of dialogue that we run up against our limitations; for that very reason, we should be grateful.”

The keynote address of the conference, entitled “Religious Transformation: Rituals of Traditional Practice and Contemporary Dialogue,” was delivered by Anne Klein, professor and chair of religious studies at Rice University. Acknowledging the significance of “the commonality of experience” of Buddhists and Christians, a theme that had been discussed a number of times throughout the day, Klein began by emphasizing that “this is a profoundly cross-cultural dialogue” and that what looks the same from the outside (e.g. a particular practice) may involve very different experiences. She illustrated this point by showing the remarkably different ways that Americans and Chinese understood the experience they had on an identical meditation retreat. She explained this by saying, “We bring our cultural selves to whatever practice we do…We all are born out of a certain cultural matrix and whatever we take into ourselves (e.g. in dialogue) participates with that matrix.” Thus, when Americans, steeped in a culture that emphasizes individuality and autonomy, practice Buddhism, a tradition that comes out of an Asian context, they will practice and experience it differently. The differences, Klein pointed out, are not just theological but involve “profoundly different pictures of the self that we consciously or unconsciously carry to our encounter with practice and with texts.”

While not losing sight of these differences, Klein characterized a basic structural characteristic of the religious experience common to each. “Perhaps the archetypal religious move of virtually any practitioner is to open beingness up to a larger system, however that is understood,” she said. When one prays or otherwise interacts with a larger system, one is expanding the sense of self. This involves commonality between religious practitioners and is, at the same time, a mark of difference because “we do this in different ways with fundamentally different assumptions about the self that we’re bringing to practice in the first place.” Klein concluded her talk with a series of stunning slides of Tibet. She used the slides to show “spaces and larger systems into which certain traditional Buddhist practices open as one cultivates them in the Tibetan tradition,” with an emphasis on the practice of “taking refuge.”

Lessons of the Conference

• One theme pervasive throughout the conference is that despite numerous metaphysical and doctrinal differences, the fact that certain practices are shared points to some deep commonalities between and among the traditions. Even if practices differ in particulars, the function of such practices, e.g., renunciation (Sister Funk) and bowing (Rev. Heng Sure), is to lead the practitioner in a movement away from the ego and to help him or her to overcome the tendencies toward self-centeredness that are found in all human beings. This fundamental move — transcending the narrow self so as to open up to and feel the connection with the larger whole, and the compassion that flows naturally as a
result — can be found in various forms in both traditions. Some might say that this is the essential soteriological (salvific, transformative) move which lies at the heart of both traditions.

• Another point highlighted by a number of speakers is that a tradition can be challenged, transformed, and ultimately enriched by an encounter with another tradition. This can take the form of a renewed understanding of fundamental theological ideas (Fr. Hand); the personal, existential challenge posed by individual members of another tradition (Fredericks, Unno); or an encounter with different contemplative, social or devotional practices in another tradition (Fr. Bernadicou, Taigen Leighton). Opening up to the truths of another tradition requires courage and humility. Such openness, which is necessary for genuine dialogue, allows us to move beyond the increasingly untenable alternatives of separatist retreat and the type of proselytizing in which one tradition, believing itself to hold a monopoly on truth, talks but does not listen.

• Honoring others involves, first and foremost, listening to them; the participants in dialogue must meet as equals, where each is the potential teacher and friend of the other.

Despite the many commonalities and the promise of mutual enrichment, some participants sounded important cautionary notes. For example, a problem highlighted by a number of participants is the complex relation of beliefs to practices. Even given similar practices, our experiences may diverge because of different background beliefs and conceptual frameworks (Komito) or differing notions of the self that we bring to practice (Klein). Further complicating the matter, these differences exist not only between the traditions but within each tradition (Foster). Ultimately, the goods articulated by each tradition may be mutually incompatible; the best we can do is cultivate an appreciation of a good that can never be ours (Yearley).

One of the most dangerous stumbling blocks in dialogue is the well-intentioned but deeply misguided attempt to diminish the importance of, or completely dismiss, differences in order to work toward a greater commonality. Honoring the other means taking seriously the very beliefs, values, and practices which are different from, and therefore pose the greatest challenge to, one’s own.

Despite pitfalls, the dialogue must proceed if we are to understand each other and ourselves better. The difficult task of dialogue participants, as we have seen, is to discover and embrace our commonality while at the same time honoring and celebrating difference and diversity. Since this is the very task essential to the health of the United States and the rest of the world, the lessons learned from interfaith dialogue can prove highly beneficial in arenas outside the exclusively religious.

Genuine dialogue must begin with humility; the hope is that it will lead to friendship. We have seen the damage done by separatism, dogmatism, and exclusivism in the previous millennium. As a practice which brings people together in order to deepen understanding, enrich our spiritual lives, and challenge our most basic presuppositions, interfaith dialogue, as this conference demonstrated, is an undertaking crucial to our individual and collective flourishing in the next millennium.