In Defense of Dialogue: A Polemic against Polemics
by Mark Berkson

In this issue of Pacific Rim Report we present an address delivered by Mark Berkson at a public conference on “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls” sponsored by the University of San Francisco (USF) Center for the Pacific Rim and its Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History. The conference took place on May 8, 1998 at the USF campus in San Francisco and was chaired by Berkson, a 1998 Kiriyama Visiting Fellow at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim.

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Interfaith dialogue is not simply an academic or theological project; it is an ethical undertaking. As Abraham Joshua Heschel has told us, “no religion is an island.” However we look at it, we must acknowledge that the world is thoroughly interdependent — whether we use that term in its Buddhist sense, or in the sense understood by economists or ecologists. Such a world, Heschel reminds us, makes parochialism untenable. Understanding one another better isn’t a luxury — it is a necessity. And participating in conversations with other traditions provides us with a model for what we all must do anyway, particularly in a country such as the United States: work through passionately held differences with civility and sophistication.

Beyond Belief: Polemic, Dialogue, and Comparative Practice

Before I discuss the possibilities of dialogue, I need to address what might be called “the polemicist’s objection,” which can be illustrated by Paul Griffiths’ challenging work on interreligious polemics. Griffiths, who is at the University of Chicago, states that interreligious dialogue is “a practice that ought to cease: it has no discernible benefits, many negative effects, and is based upon a radical misapprehension of the nature and significance of religious commitments.” If he’s right, then we’re all making a mistake by participating in a project such as this conference. In other words, he is forcing us to justify our enterprise, which is a valuable exercise. My response must come in the form of a defense of interreligious dialogue, particularly a defense of the non-polemical, “dialogical,” or “appreciative” mode of encounter rather than simply the use of polemic. Ironically, my argument against polemic will have to take the form of a polemic, so in a way, the polemicist wins even if he loses. Actually, I don’t really find it paradoxical that I am going to try to argue for the use of ways of talking, thinking, and being with each other that do not simply involve arguing because I think these non-polemical forms of encounter lead to valuable things, such as deeper understanding of the other and oneself, self-transformation, and better relations among members of different traditions.

The polemicist focuses on propositional truth claims held by members of religious traditions. In his work, the polemicist reminds us of something very important — that conversations among members of different religious traditions will involve deep disagreements about very important issues. I don’t think anyone would dispute this claim. Disagreement — if carried out with respect and in the right spirit of a mutual search for truth — is not the sign of a failed encounter. We should not fear that. But we should worry about the possibility of focusing so much on propositional truth claims made by theologians in a tradition and defended with analytic and rhetorical tools that we overlook all of the other things that matter in a religious tradition.

Herein lies the problem: the polemicist treats religious traditions (at least in the context of encounters with other traditions) as primarily “assertoric”; that is, they assert and defend propositional claims about the world. Thus, the proper mode of investigation involves analyzing these claims and evaluating their truth or falsity. However, beliefs are but one aspect of religion. Religious traditions also involve other realms, particularly the realms of practice and experience — of embodied ritual, of contemplative disciplines, of daily routines. So if our sole or dominant mode of encounter is polemical, it will involve an over-reliance on evaluating truth claims and miss much else.
Indeed, if we look at the language different traditions use to make claims about ultimate reality or the nature of the world, we often seem to be in the realm of incommensurable or incompatible positions, of the kind of difference that either prevents mutual understanding or leads to insoluble conflicts. But if we look at what adherents do, we begin to see similarities that can at least form the starting point for true dialogue. We recognize genuine commonalities on the level of embodied practice. In Buddhism and Christianity (as well as in many other traditions), we discover practices such as chanting, silent contemplation, and certain forms of renunciation (e.g., fasting). We see that practitioners of both traditions travel often great distances to sacred sites in pilgrimages.

The commonality of experience, I would argue, is possible because here we are at the level of practice, and it is the universal fact of our embodiedness that guarantees certain commonalities. And keeping the body in mind while we do comparative work does not bring the high theological conversation down to the level of the mundane. We must remember the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.” Those who see complete incommensurability are generally guilty of linguistic reductionism; they miss the level of shared experience at the somatic and affective levels. I don’t believe in radical incommensurability. If it were true, conversion would be impossible and culture shock would be fatal.

We can see one example of shared practice when we look at monastic life, which is the first topic of Panel I of our conference today. Despite the often very different ways in which Zen and Benedictine monks talk about the world and view their experience, a study of their day to day lives reveals remarkable similarities. We see that there is a common rhythm to their lives that weaves together elements such as communal service, chanting, long periods of quiet contemplation, and manual labor. When monks in both traditions speak in a less technical language that does not employ the special terminology of their tradition, they often use similar words to describe what they are doing, e.g., overcoming selfish desires, observing thoughts, producing states of peace, cultivating compassion. This is certainly not to say that there won’t be important and revealing differences. But these differences are significant because they already presuppose a deep commonality as well.

This underlying commonality exists among monks (as it does, I would argue, among all practitioners) not because of metaphysical agreements, but because of common humanity. That monks of both traditions are human ensures that they will have to struggle with problems of selfishness, desire, fear, and doubt. And these very different religious traditions have discovered that certain ways of life and certain practices help cultivate a way of being oriented less toward the self, the “ego-centered form of existence”—less focused on our own wants and needs and more on others and on a way of being filled with humility, awareness, and gratitude. Ways of life that involve discipline in matters of appetites, training of the mind, labor, and communal living help to bring about this way of being.

We are nevertheless left with a problem: in what ways, and on what levels, do beliefs (keeping in mind that different beliefs are held in different ways) shape not only our understanding and account of our experience, but the experience itself? When a Zen monk and a Benedictine monk are both gathering for early morning chanting, or both sitting in silence, are they really doing the same thing? How would we know? It would seem that the relationship of beliefs to practices will always be an issue that we must struggle with, and that the only way we can even begin to have a better understanding of what is going on with the other—and with ourselves—is to talk to each other.

In addition to understanding the beliefs and practices of other traditions better, there is also the possibility of integrating some of these beliefs and practices into our own path. This step may bring potential rewards, but it also possesses serious complexities and stumbling blocks. Thomas Merton wrote, “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.” Paul Griffiths does not seem to see the value in learning from the practices of other traditions and incorporating them into one’s own path. For example, he criticizes a Jesuit who teaches a Buddhist mindfulness practice, pejoratively labeling this “plunder” and “expropriation,” assuming a kind of bad faith on the priest’s part.

Griffiths fails to see that, as Father Paul Bernadicou’s presentation today demonstrates, many practitioners have found that their experience and understanding of their own tradition are enriched by learning the practice of another, so long as this is done thoughtfully and carefully. I see in Griffiths’ criticism a kind of arrogance—is he saying that we have nothing to learn from each other’s practices? Griffiths, who doubts the sincerity of those who seek this deeper, experiential understanding of other traditions, seems to assume that the only sincere way to encounter another tradition is to argue against it.

Therefore, one benefit of opening our conference today with a discussion of comparative practice is that it presents an important corrective to an exclusively polemical approach.

Religious Commitment(s) and Identity(ies)

One way to understand what it is to be truly religious, to live a religious life within any given tradition, is to see the categories, understandings, and values provided by the tradition as all-encompassing. From the traditional point of view, separating off a “religious sphere of life” from the rest of life is unthinkable; the very idea of such a separation is, one can argue, a modern phenomenon. In the traditional religious perspective, there is no sphere of life, no realm of action untouched by religious categories and guidance.

There are many virtues in such a way of life. There is a kind of coherence, integrity, and commitment that is missing in many fragmented modern lives, lives which do not fit into any larger framework and feel divorced from both history and the larger community. Taking this view, Griffiths claims that the central characteristic of a religious worldview is that it is totalizing, complete, and provides an “unsurpassable context.” While this may be true for many religious people, I would argue that there is a great danger inherent in the inability to step back
and examine one’s religious beliefs and commitments from another perspective. What, however, can provide that perspective? There is no “view from nowhere.” It is precisely here that interfaith dialogue can be so valuable because the other tradition provides that much-needed perspective. Building up one’s apologetic fortifications and using the polemical arsenal prevents one from ever realizing this invaluable potential of dialogue.

Perhaps we can think of another approach to being a committed member of a tradition by employing an admittedly imperfect analogy — that of national citizenship. I care deeply about America. And yet, when I think of myself as an American, my relationship with this country frequently involves vigorous, passionate disagreement, efforts to change it, and might even involve civil disobedience. I would argue that one can be a good citizen only when one cares enough to point out what’s wrong with one’s country and to want to change it. In the religious context, this is what Peter Berger calls “the heretical imperative,” i.e., our need to be constantly vigilant and willing to challenge our own traditions to combat the tendency toward distortion or ossification in them. Rabbinic Judaism, often characterized by the famous phrase “three rabbis, four opinions,” is constituted more by the ongoing arguments than by agreed beliefs and interpretations. In fact, the name “Israel” itself can mean “the one who struggles with God”; the name was given to Jacob after he wrestled with God. What it means to be a good Jew then, analogous to being a good American, and I would argue a good Christian or Buddhist, is that we wrestle with our traditions, try to improve them when they need it, not despite but because we care so deeply about our traditions.

Such an approach also allows us to think about “dual citizenship” in the religious context, e.g., “Zen Christian” or “Buddhist Jew.” While the attempt to live a life committed to two religious traditions is fraught with complexities, it also holds great potential, for a dual commitment may be preferable to the forced rejection of a tradition that speaks to one in a compelling way. The result may be a state of ongoing tension (albeit creative tension) or a new, imaginative reconciliation. All lives involve such tensions and attempted reconciliations, and not necessarily on explicitly religious grounds. We are all informed and constituted by multiple streams of thought, which are not perfectly compatible much of the time. For example, a close friend of mine is struggling to reconcile her life as an observant Jew with her commitment to feminism. Perhaps we can think of another approach to being a committed member of a tradition by employing an admittedly imperfect analogy — that of national citizenship. I care deeply about America. And yet, when I think of myself as an American, my relationship with this country frequently involves vigorous, passionate disagreement, efforts to change it, and might even involve civil disobedience. I would argue that one can be a good citizen only when one cares enough to point out what’s wrong with one’s country and to want to change it. In the religious context, this is what Peter Berger calls “the heretical imperative,” i.e., our need to be constantly vigilant and willing to challenge our own traditions to combat the tendency toward distortion or ossification in them. Rabbinic Judaism, often characterized by the famous phrase “three rabbis, four opinions,” is constituted more by the ongoing arguments than by agreed beliefs and interpretations. In fact, the name “Israel” itself can mean “the one who struggles with God”; the name was given to Jacob after he wrestled with God. What it means to be a good Jew then, analogous to being a good American, and I would argue a good Christian or Buddhist, is that we wrestle with our traditions, try to improve them when they need it, not despite but because we care so deeply about our traditions.

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much of the time more commonalities will be found moving across traditions along the same portion of a continuum than moving within one tradition along a continuum. In other words, an egalitarian, pluralistic Christian with a nondual conception of the Absolute will have, in certain fundamental respects, far more in common with a similarly described Buddhist than she would with a patriarchal, exclusivist Christian with a dualistic conception of the Absolute. While the comparison between the Christian and Buddhist might seem difficult at first due to the different symbol systems, vocabularies, and texts each of them brings to the table, the work of comparison should reveal the deep similarities within. And while it may seem as if the comparative effort undertaken between two Christians would be easier at first (after all, both speak of things such as “God,” “Christ,” and “grace,” etc.), such ease is deceptive. Closer examination will reveal deep differences once those terms are unpacked.

Transformation, Openness, and Religious Virtues

In the process of working through similarities and differences, both traditions may be transformed. The members of one tradition may come to a new understanding of their tradition’s concepts, symbols, and practices in light of the encounter with another tradition. William Hocking’s notion of “reconception” illustrates one way of understanding such transformation. Hocking points out that the encounter of traditions involves both broadening, with each tradition “extending its base to comprise what it finds valid in other (traditions),” and deepening, which is the attempt by a tradition in light of that encounter to “better grasp its own essence.” The key point here is that “broadening necessarily stimulates the deepening process.” The renewed, deeper understanding is what Hocking calls “reconceiving” one’s tradition. In many cases unnoticed, lost, or unappreciated aspects of one’s own tradition are rediscovered or revived in the process. It takes humility and courage to recognize and incorporate new truths, to open yourself up to their implications, and to discover what they demand of you in terms of understanding, practice, attitude, and social action. In this type of encounter, individuals, and ultimately traditions, can be transformed in the process.

Furthermore, we must remember that when two traditions encounter each other, we do not see the meeting of two static entities; we see the coming together of two always changing, living traditions. When we are trying to understand a religious tradition, we are trying to grasp a moving target. Traditions are always in the process of transformation.

On the one hand, we can say that religious traditions have a conservative impulse, partly in order to retain their identity and integrity. They pass down revered texts, authoritative commentaries, or lineages of transmission; they give us normative rituals and practices. But at the same time, we see that they are all constituted by continuous change. They have all been shaped in powerful ways by their encounter with other traditions, both religious and “secular,” e.g. Buddhism by Confucian and Daoist thought in China; Christianity by Greek thought and the Enlightenment. They have continuously changed as they have creatively absorbed the insights of other traditions while retaining their own integrity. Some thinkers hold a triumphalist view of what will occur in the encounter of traditions. This is a view sometimes advanced by Alasdair Maclntyre, despite his reverence for one of the greatest synthetic minds, Thomas Aquinas. In fact, when deep religious traditions encounter each other, it’s not that one “fails” and the other “succeeds.” Great traditions can draw on their own resources to retain coherence while meeting the challenges and absorbing the insights of new cultures, historical epochs and, I would argue, other traditions. However, openness to change is rarely seen as the intended attitude and practice of the members of the traditions themselves. Perhaps it should be. In this kind of dialogue, we are dealing in a more reflective, explicit way with something that is always occurring anyway.
Genuine dialogue is a fragile achievement. It is not true that whenever two people or groups of people talk to each other, there is dialogue. In fact, I would say that in the truest sense of the term, dialogue rarely occurs. Entering into dialogue requires what I would call ontological openness, openness to the possibility of existential transformation when, to borrow Charles Hallisey’s paraphrase of Heidegger, we “realize what the other says has a place in our future.” We must look at our encounter with others as a chance to engage in the mutual investigation of being, of the nature of reality, and of the best way to live. The aim should not be to eliminate differences (which, in any case, is impossible), but rather to see differences differently: not as threatening, but as something we value because they challenge us, move us, or inspire us.

One theme that is woven throughout the work of thinkers like Lee Yearley, Jim Fredericks, and Mark Unno is the need for us to cultivate virtues in order for the dialogue, and for our pluralistic society itself, to flourish. These virtues, such as spiritual regret, interreligious friendship, and spiritual humility, are themselves cultivated and strengthened in the course of participating in the dialogue. Interfaith dialogue leads to the cultivation of other important virtues as well, particularly imagination and empathy. We cultivate imagination by making analogical connections between terms, symbols, and practices in different traditions. We learn to take an “imaginative insider’s” view, trying, insofar as possible, to enter creatively into another way of looking at the world. This process requires some form of bracketing deeply held values and assumptions, which Durwood Foster calls the “de-absolutizing” of one’s own grasp of the truth. The latter is a difficult, but valuable exercise. We must always bear in mind that we may return from it a changed person.

The polemicist’s objection can stand as a good warning, a caveat before we enter dialogue: beware of the overly easy, superficial encounter — of domesticating the vision of the other and of taming a potential challenge to one’s way of life by smoothing it out until it looks enough like one’s own to avoid confrontation. But taking his warning into account, we must proceed with the dialogue. Polemic is a tool to be used judiciously, not something that should characterize or dominate the encounter. Ultimately, we are fragile, partial beings groping towards an ever deeper understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world so as to live better. To treat each other better, which requires us to understand each other, is one of the primary imperatives of all religious traditions. Dialogue, listening to each other, is a good place to start. Within the realm of the encounter of religious traditions, I am more willing to risk the overenthusiastic, ironic embrace of friendship going too far than I am the deformations that accompany the extreme of hard, combative polemics. Ultimately, I believe — at times I would even argue — that dialogue brings one closer to the other, and therefore closer to the truth.

Candles in the Dark: Illuminating Rumi’s Elephant

Griffiths discusses the famous parable of the blind man and the elephant. He summarizes it this way: “Four blind men are wandering through the forest one day when they meet an elephant. Each grasps one part of the elephant’s body in an attempt to find out what kind of beast this is, and after the animal has passed by they compare notes. One says that the elephant is like a thick and sinuous snake (he has grasped its trunk); another says that it is like a massive and immovable pillar (he has grasped one of its legs)…(and so on)…After discussing the matter, the blind men conclude that they must have been touching different beasts, for they can arrive at no single picture that will make sense of their different experiences.” Griffiths sees “esotericist and elitist overtones” here. He argues that the story suggests that there is a vantage point outside of all of the individual experiences from which the apparent contradictions are transcended. Such a vantage point is available, it seems, to religious virtuosi (i.e. the “sighted”) and not ordinary people. While there may be validity to this interpretation, there is another way of looking at the story.

A beautiful version of this parable by the Sufi poet Jalaladin Rumi involves not blind men, but an elephant in the dark, and it has a revealing ending. After describing how each man touches a different part and describes what an elephant is in very different terms, Rumi writes, “Each of us touches one place and understands the whole in that way….If each of us held a candle there, and if we went in together, we could see it.” In order for light to shine over the whole, we all must bring our candles; we must have the different perspectives and understandings provided by the different religious traditions to gain fuller, deeper, and richer understandings of human experience and ultimate reality. We must recognize that our grasp of the truth, our tradition’s grasp, is always only a partial truth: the record of one, though extremely rich and varied, tradition’s understanding of reality and human existence.

In Rumi’s version, then, we need each to bring our vantage point to the table in order to understand the whole. Since each of us is grounded in a particular tradition that emphasizes certain ways of looking at the world, certain ways of carving up, of interpreting, of explaining, and of understanding, we often fail to see the limitations of our view unless we are taken outside of it by a genuine engagement (i.e. dialogue) with another.

This image should help us avoid three possible misconceptions: first, that the view that I am advocating in this talk represents the supermarket type of syncretism where an individual who occupies some space outside of any tradition just picks and chooses decontextualized aspects from a variety of traditions — a little Hinduism here, a sprinkling of Native American there, some Daoism and Christianity — in order to create one’s own hodge-podge. In my view, the more superficial forms of what is called “New Age” suffer from this tendency. If a participant in dialogue is to shine any illuminating light at all, then she must be informed by a deep understanding of and commitment to her tradition.
The second misunderstanding that we should avoid is that dialogue aims at any kind of religious uniformity, that is, some kind of world religion in which all differences are blurred or eliminated. Not only is such a thing impossible given the irreducible differences that exist, it is highly undesirable. Whatever such a creature would look like, it would be analogous to, using Rumi’s poem, shining an increasingly bright light on one spot of the elephant and gradually seeing the rest covered in darkness. The diversity of religious traditions is something that should be valued and preserved, which fact should give those with an overly zealous missionary fervor some pause. Too much has been lost — languages, cultures, traditions — to the kind of conversion effort that is blind to the beauty, truth, and value of the other tradition.

There is a third possible misconception. My position does not require us to suspend judgment of all religious claims. While many different claims, some of which seem in tension with or perhaps incompatible with others, may each capture partial truths, some may be quite off the mark and contain little or no truth at all. In the terms of our parable, while we need the perspectives of all the men feeling the elephant, if one of the men has wandered away a bit and is feeling a chariot or horse near the elephant, we would hope that this would eventually be revealed as a view of something else altogether. Being a pluralist — by which I mean recognizing that there are truths in many traditions, that no one tradition has the monopoly on truth (possesses Truth in its entirety), and that different religious paths have soteriological efficacy — does not mean being a universalist, by which I mean that every (possible or existing) path has truth (or truth in equal amounts) or has equal soteriological efficacy. Basically, some religious groups — some ways of thinking about the world, being in the world, and behaving towards others — are misguided, wrong, and are harmful to their practitioners and others. 32

Beyond the Marketplace — the Common Cause of Religious Traditions

We have already seen that interfaith dialogue is necessary because of the interdependence of the world which requires us to understand each other. There is another reason that religious traditions must come together. They need to make common cause against a movement that is contrary to the spirit of religion in many ways; a movement that may, if we are not vigilant, prove more powerful than all religions and that is sweeping the world at a rate which makes the spread of Christianity and Islam look glacial in comparison. I am speaking of Materialistic Consumerism and its God, the Market. This is not an objection to the market per se, for it certainly has its place. Rather, it is a warning about what can happen when we deify it. 33 This free market deification, which rests on a foundation of atomistic individualism, immediate gratification, and the glorification of greed and the profit-motive, poses the greatest challenge to all religious points of view. Despite the numerous, important differences that exist among religious traditions, when we look at them in contrast to marketplace individualism, their commonalities look far more important.

It is worth examining briefly the similarities in the religious traditions that emerge in sharp relief when they are seen against a backdrop of the “religion of the market,” a term used by David Loy in an excellent piece that informs the following comments. 34

1. The doctrine of the unencumbered free market and its corresponding theology, economics, views human beings as separate, self-interested consumers motivated by profit and the pursuit of wealth. The underlying assumption here is that such a way of viewing human beings is perfectly natural; it is a given. 35 In reality, such a way of being is created more than it is discovered, and if we must be critical of zealous proselytizing, we must roundly condemn the ever-increasing domination of advertising, which constitutes that single largest-scale attempt at transforming human consciousness in history and creating a world of eager consumers whose self-image is tied up with material acquisition. This process is electronic proselytizing aimed at conversion. It seems as if the Nike Swoosh is more ubiquitous and recognizable than the Cross or the Lotus. This whole worldview rests on the cultivation of material desire and greed. When we look at religious traditions — and here we focus on Buddhism and Christianity — we see a deep suspicion of greed, of the harm done to human character by an obsession with wealth and money. Both traditions devote much time to trying to overcome these damaging movements of the heart. This is one reason that renunciation, in some form, is virtually a religious universal.

2. Religious traditions provide a desperately needed voice on behalf of the voiceless; they issue passionate calls for social justice. They are dedicated both to easing the suffering of others and to a commitment to the sanctity of life. The market is indifferent to such things. To claim that the marketplace should be unregulated is to acquiesce in the face of market-produced injustice. That we are willing to tolerate the most unequal income distribution of any industrialized nation is, I would argue, a religious failure, and one that cannot be overcome by a political solution alone; it requires a religious transformation — a strengthening of conscience and an opening of the heart.

3. The religious perspective brings about a reverence for tradition; the marketplace perspective is obsessed with the cult of newness, namely anything that goes faster or stores more information. Personally, I find the MacIntosh advertisements that use the images of Gandhi very disturbing because they are appropriating the image of one whose deepest values stand in stark contrast to the world represented by computers. Admittedly, I wrote this talk on a Mac, but it gives me pause to see Gandhi’s face on a Macintosh ad given that he wrote, “I do not believe that multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them is taking the world a single step nearer its goal….I wholeheartedly detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time….If modern civilization stands for all this… I call it satanic…civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction, of wants.” 36

Surely, at a deep level, the religious traditions have far more in common with each other than any one of them does with the reigning “religion” in the U.S., by which I mean the one which we try our hardest to export to every corner of the globe; whose temples are malls; whose seminaries are business schools; and whose Pope, of course, is Alan Greenspan.

One benefit of interfaith dialogue is that it can allow for a discussion of shared strategies for combating the ever-increasing dominance of this view of the world and the ways of thinking and acting it spawns. In Milan Kundera’s most recent novel, Identity, we find these words: “How is friendship born? Certainly as an alliance against adversity.” The religious traditions need to come together to provide some point of view —
and it may be the only one — outside the realm of the market in today’s world. We must echo Heschel when he wrote of the different religious traditions, “We must pray for each other’s health.”

Conclusion

If we proceed in dialogue with care, judiciously, and with mutual respect and openness, we are repaid with deeper understanding of the other, and also with a deeper understanding of our own traditions and, therefore, of ourselves. The open encounter, the genuine dialogue, is the path to this and will lead to places polemic cannot go. When people stop arguing and begin truly listening and conversing, we have the possibility of understanding and empathy; when we focus on dialogue rather than polemic, we have an encounter not of viewpoints or arguments, but of human beings.

The main point here is this: religion is not simply about the mind. It is also, and perhaps primarily, about the heart and the spirit. And while polemical argument can involve the coming together of two minds, it can prevent the encounter of two hearts. And it is the latter that is more important and more fruitful.

We can see a religious dialogue as a sharing of perspectives rather than, as the polemical approach would have it, an exchange of arguments. If the participant is open and has sufficient humility, she can learn to occupy imaginatively another perspective and thus to see the world in a different way. Absolute certainty about one’s perspective largely comes, I believe, from ontological anxiety, resulting from the need for certitudes in a world that stubbornly refuses to give them. Learning to bracket one’s view so as to imaginatively take on that of another requires a kind of phenomenological suppleness, imagination, creativity, and spiritual humility. It involves the recognition that one may have a partial or flawed perspective. Heschel writes that “humility is the beginning and end of religious thinking, the secret test of faith.”

In addition, we gain new teachers. Borrowing a distinction from Kierkegaard, when we are studying objective truth — a mathematical formula or world capitals — it does not matter who the teacher is; it might as well have been taught by another. But it is a special characteristic of subjective truth, truth that speaks to our very existence, that it matters very much who the teacher is. In the words of Van Harvey, “In the realm of existential knowledge, teachers are not mere occasions. Their images stamp and condition the consciousness of those whom they have taught.” What gains might come when a Buddhist comes to see Jesus Christ as his teacher, or a Christian Shakyamuni Buddha? When we encounter another tradition, we are challenged by new texts, ideas, and practices. And, perhaps most important of all, the new teachers we gain are not only the sages, prophets, and mystics of a tradition, but the teachers sitting next to you in the audience. Actually, it’s not really accurate to speak about a dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. The conversation is always between Christians and Buddhists.

This is why, despite the development of disembodied media such as the Internet and the proliferation of journals, the face to face encounter, the coming together of human beings in their full embodiedness, is still crucial because it is here that co-humanity can be fully experienced. The commonality — our co-humanity — is what makes dialogue possible. The differences are what make it interesting, challenging, and worthwhile. Wilhelm Dilthey writes, “Interpretation would be impossible if expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in them. It lies, therefore, between these two extremes.” By learning to see your face in the face of another while preserving the other’s difference and uniqueness allows us to experience the truth put so powerfully by Miguel de Unamuno, “I am a human being. No other human being do I deem a stranger.”

In encountering another tradition through dialogue, we learn not only to understand the other, but also ourselves — in fact, each process involves the other, because our self-understanding and our very selves are dialogically constituted. Herbert Fingarette crystallized a Confucian insight when he reminded us, “Unless there are two human beings, there cannot be one human being.” Interfaith dialogue is not about winning (or even about agreeing), but about learning to talk in such a way so as to deepen understanding. With polemic, you’re trying to prove something; with dialogue, you’re trying to learn something. Dialogue simply cannot be about agreement or disagreement; we can’t predict that in advance. It is a stance of openness, humility, and mutual inquiry. It involves not only learning about the other, but also learning along with the other, about the meaning of our lives.

It is my hope that this conference might provide the opportunity for such increased understanding and appreciation, as well as the possibility of transformation, and that it might act as a catalyst for continued conversation and exploration long after the day is over.

Notes
1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, No Religion is an Island, ed. Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).
2 The view that I am arguing against here is primarily the one found in Griffiths, “Why We Need Interreligious Polemics,” First Things (June/July 1994), pp. 31-37 (Hereafter, “Polemics”). This represents the strongest anti-dialogue stance and is therefore a useful position with which to argue here. Griffiths takes, it seems to me, a more nuanced, balanced position and a less strident tone in an earlier work, his excellent book, An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991) (Hereafter, Apology). I agree with much of what is said in this work and will refer to this book throughout my paper. Significantly, Griffiths opens the book by arguing for “the need for the traditional discipline of apologetics as one important component of interreligious dialogue” (p. xi, italics mine).

3 A statement with which I agree completely. In the article, however, he strongly argues in favor of polemics and against dialogue. He makes it clear in the book that he opposes those forms of dialogue in which “criticism of religious beliefs and practices other than those of one’s own community is always inappropriate,” which is not a view of dialogue that I advocate here.
4 This can be seen simply by looking at the chapter titles of Griffiths’ book Apology for Apologetics, including “The Properties of Doctrine-Expressing Sentences” and “Incompatibility Among Doctrine-Expressing Sentences.” Given that within every religious tradition there are
those who point out the limits of language and the inability of “doctrine expressing sentences” to capture ultimate reality, an exclusive focus on such propositions should give us pause. **BACK TO TEXT**

5 Some have objected to this statement, arguing that the “social construction of the body” calls this claim into question. I agree that the body, like all phenomena, does not escape social construction. In particular, as soon as we start to talk about it, think about it, etc., it’s already linguistically and culturally mediated and inscribed. One could also say that while certain somatic experiences (e.g. certain sensations, appetites, drives, feelings) are universal, the experiences are always shaped through socialization. While I agree with these claims, I do not think that social construction goes “all the way down.” In everyday life, there is continuous reciprocal interplay between somatic experience and the process of cultural construction and interpretation. But many Buddhists have argued that through a practice like meditation, the constructions (even the most stubborn ones, like “the self”) can be seen through and dissolved; their power over our experience (to mediate, frame, limit and interpret it) fades and disappears (and then, on this view, reality can be experienced in its “suchness”). Yet even if “raw, somatic experience” can never be philosophically or phenomenologically disentangled from the layers of social construction, its existence is enough to guarantee a somatic “common ground.” In other words, somatic experience is both socially constructed and, at the same time, always escaping social construction at a certain level, always existing beyond the reach of mediation. For a sophisticated treatment of the relationship of mind to body from the perspectives of both cognitive science and Buddhist mindfulness practice, see Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). The importance of the body in religious practice is a point skillfully illuminated by Anne Klein in *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). See especially her discussion of body and mind in meditative practice, pp. 70-72. Also see her “Grounding and Opening” in *Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment*, ed. Lenore Friedman and Susan Moon (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), pp. 139-147. **BACK TO TEXT**

6 While many scholars emphasize the linguistic mediation of the body, others, such as Merleau-Ponty (particularly in “The Body as Expression, and Speech” in *The Phenomenology of Perception*) and David Abram, discuss the somatic and sensorial dimensions of language itself. On such a view, the body itself is the primordial ground of language. Abram states that the ongoing reciprocal relationship between the living body and the world that surrounds it “is the very soil and support of the conscious exchange we call language… We learn our native language not mentally but bodily.” (pp. 74-5) In a discussion of Merleau-Ponty, Abram concludes, “If Merleau-Ponty is right…(Meaning) remains rooted in the sensory life of the body…” in David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 79-80. **BACK TO TEXT**

7 In *Apology*, pp. 28ff, Griffiths provides an excellent theoretical and empirical argument against any radical incommensurability position. Those who take an apologetic stance, like those engaged in more irenic dialogue, must believe in the commensurability, the possibility of mutual understanding and judgment, of the claims of different traditions. Those who believe in strict incommensurability, it seems, would fail to see the value in any interreligious discussion, whether apologetic or irenic. **BACK TO TEXT**

8 See, for example, Morris Augustine, “Zen and Benedictine Monks as Mythopoetic Models of Nonegocentered Worldviews and Lifestyles,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 6 (1986). **BACK TO TEXT**


10 “Polemics,” p. 32. **BACK TO TEXT**

11 “Polemics,” p. 35. **BACK TO TEXT**


14 It is helpful to see attempts by others to work through issues that arise when one is informed by and committed to two traditions. See, for example, Sylvia Boorstein, That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). See also Roger Corless, “The Mutual Fulfillment of Buddhism and Christianity in Co-Inherent Superconsciousness,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul Ingram and Frederick Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986) and Henry Smith’s response to Corless, “Beyond Dual Religious Belonging: Roger Corless and Explorations in Buddhist-Christian Identity,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997), pp. 161-177. **BACK TO TEXT**

15 Quoted in Corless, p. 133. Griffiths lays out some stark either/or’s with a bit too much certitude: “If the profoundly personal theistic mysticism of Teresa of Avila is veridical and the doctrine-expressing sentences that both form and express it are true, then a Zen Buddhist’s satori cannot be veridical, and the doctrine-expressing sentences that both have taken different paths, a perspective that is illustrated by, for example, the Hindu notions of *saguna* (with form/qualities) and *nirguna* (without form/qualities) Brahman. **BACK TO TEXT**

16 On the issue of the complexity of religious identities, see Sallie B. King, “Toward a Buddhist Model of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990), pp. 121-131. **BACK TO TEXT**

17 Bliss Queen, p. 67. **BACK TO TEXT**

18 Griffiths states that certain Buddhist beliefs (e.g. that existents are impermanent) “are instrumental in fostering, for the individual who holds them, the basic Buddhist virtue of reducing passionate attachment” (Apology, p. 10). However, many Buddhist thinkers (e.g. see Mark Unno, below) point out that holding on to propositional beliefs itself fosters the very kind of attachment that Buddhists want to avoid; some proceed to negate the possibility of holding to any propositional claim whatsoever (a practice which, they say, has soteriological benefits). What can an approach like Griffiths’ do with a position that denies that holding and defending propositional beliefs (while an activity that might have certain benefits at particular times) can liberate one — and in fact, might be an obstacle to liberation? For many Buddhists, it is a practice (e.g. meditation, chanting) which is necessary for liberation, a practice which instead of providing one with some new set of “true” propositional
beliefs changes one’s relationship to beliefs in general. In his discussion of the Buddhist “no-self” doctrine, Griffiths discusses the various claims that make up the doctrine and engages in apologetics against them. But he does not address the problem that arises from the fact that, for many Buddhists, the experience of emptiness, no-self, etc. is only possible through meditative practice. While Griffiths acknowledges the importance of practice (see Apology p. 16), he does not address how this affects the apologetic enterprise. BACK TO TEXT

19 As there are many ways to be a Buddhist or a Christian (many possible locations along the continuum), we must look at who is being taken as the representative of each tradition in the dialogue. Which brings up an important point about conferences such as these. Given that the participants are those committed to the process of dialogue and recognize its value, the group will be self-selected and certain points on the continuum may be excluded. Unfortunately, some of those who may not participate are those who could benefit most from learning to listen to those from other traditions. It takes a certain amount of courage to genuinely participate in dialogue, for true participation means openness and openness involves risk. BACK TO TEXT

20 Griffiths discusses this point in Apology, p. 13 and p. 51. BACK TO TEXT

21 William Hocking, “Reconception,” in Attitudes Toward Other Religions, pp. 133-149. For another example of the kind of reconception that can occur through a deep encounter with another tradition, see Gordon Kaufman, “God and Emptiness: An Experimental Essay,” Buddhist-Christian Studies 9 (1989), pp. 175-187. BACK TO TEXT

22 Hocking, p. 136. BACK TO TEXT

23 Similarly, John Cobb states that “authentic dialogue must lead beyond dialogue to the radical transformation of the dialogue partners.” He speaks of the need to “cross over” in order to expose ourselves to the wisdom of the other and then return, “facing the task of restructuring our heritage in light of what we have learned.” In the process, one also witnesses to the truth of one’s own tradition, thus inviting the other to self-transformation as well. John Cobb, Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 140. BACK TO TEXT


25 This raises the question of the role of the missionary and evangelizing in general. A discussion of this issue can be found in a section entitled “Mission and Dialogue,” Buddhist-Christian Studies 17 (1997), pp. 89-158. BACK TO TEXT

26 Fr. Robert Kennedy, in Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit, writes, “What I looked for in Zen was not a new faith, but a new way of being Catholic” (p. 13). BACK TO TEXT

27 I do not have time to address fully some of the ethical qualsm I have about an emphasis on polemics, but it is worth noting the unpleasant historical associations between the practice of demonstrating the superiority of one’s religious position on the one hand, and the ethnocentricity, imperialism, violence, and oppression that often accompany such a practice. While Griffiths points out, correctly, that this is not a necessary connection, it is one that has occurred frequently enough to give us pause and, given human nature, is always a threat to occur again. While the link between a way of thinking about the beliefs and practices of an “other” (e.g. polemically, aiming for “victory and vindication”) and a way of treating them (e.g. ranging from condescension to violence) may not be a necessary one, it is also probably not completely historically contingent. Griffiths explores the social and political dimensions of apologetics in Apology, stating that “certain types of political situations make the apologetical enterprise not only inadvisable but actually reprehensible” (p. 77). BACK TO TEXT

28 Apology, p. 46. BACK TO TEXT


30 Another way to be taken outside of our own viewpoint (consistent, perhaps, with Griffiths’ “elitist” interpretation) is the “mystic’s path,” to see through or beyond our inherited system of thought to “ultimate reality.” BACK TO TEXT

31 Religious syncretism is dealt with in a recent issue of the Utne Reader (July-August 1998) in an article by Jeremiah Creedon entitled, “God with a Million Faces” (pp. 42-48). When religious leaders from a variety of traditions were interviewed, they almost unanimously rejected this “supermarket” approach, underlining the need for commitment to the path of a particular tradition. Here are some examples: Father Thomas Keating, “The ideal way to develop a practice is to plug into a tradition that has long-range experience, literature and rituals that support it. When you make a collage of various traditions, you run the risk of digging too many wells in a desert… whereas if you work with one well that has a good reputation, where water is to be found, it might be more rewarding in the long term.” Sylvia Boorstein, “The pitfall of inventing your own practice is that you have no way of judging spiritual progress if you’re completely alone…. When you work within a community, you support each other.” Sri Swami Satchidananda, “I don’t recommend trying to walk on all the different paths at once because you will never reach your goal that way.” Frederica Mathewes-Green, “We can only gain wisdom that transcends time by exiting our time and entering upon an ancient path — and accepting it on its own terms” (all are found on pp. 44-48). BACK TO TEXT

32 P.J. Ivanhoe put it well: “A big tent is still a tent, and there are things we want to keep outside the tent.” BACK TO TEXT

33 We have a sign of “deification” when people regard human beings as subordinated to the “demands of the market” rather than demanding that the market serve the well being of people. There is now virtually no realm — health care, media, corrections, the arts, education — that has not been marketized. And, remarkably enough, there are calls that even the few areas that remain relatively free from market forces (the vanishing breed of public-supported broadcasting and art, state-run prisons, public schools, etc.) be subject to the sanctified Invisible Hand. The ultimate criterion, the regnant judgment of worth, is not human flourishing, social cohesion, artistic or intellectual excellence for such things are not quantifiable. The criterion is now: How much money does it bring in? What can I get out of it? This is why I have begun to look at teaching religion as a guerilla activity — operating “behind enemy lines” to challenge the often unspoken assumptions, values and world-views of the students and, increasingly, the rest of the University. Fortunately, in religious studies, this job is made easier because many of the most powerful critiques, and some of the most compelling alternate ways to look at the world and the self, are found within the religious traditions we teach. What is important is that the way in which we teach them must allow the students to experience this challenge in the most powerful way. See my “Teaching Religion as an Existential Encounter,” Religion and Education (upcoming). BACK TO TEXT


35 Loy points out that while “we tend to view the profit motive as universal and rational… anthropologists have discovered that it is not traditional to traditional societies. Insofar as it is found among them, it plays a very circumscribed role, viewed warily because of its tendency
to disrupt social relations” (p. 278). As a result of living in an increasingly corporation-dominated society, Americans no longer seem to think of themselves primarily as intellectual explorers, spiritual seekers, active citizens of a republic, or even as members of communities. Rather we are continuously treated as, and thus gradually reduced to, self-interested consumers motivated by profit and wealth. And this has been done increasingly with the complicity of the University, which itself is now a willing participant in this worldview and process. See James Engell and Anthony Dangerefield, “Humanities in the Age of Money,” *Harvard Magazine* (May-June 1998), p. 52. The article makes the point that the academic disciplines which are most valued have such status because they seem to 1) promise more money to their graduates (e.g. engineering, pre-professional studies); 2) are about money (e.g. business, economics); and/or 3) bring in a lot of money.  


37 Heschel opposes the polemical approach, writing that “Dialogue must not degenerate into dispute, into an effort on the part of each to get the upper hand.” He sums up his position this way, “The purpose of religious communication among human beings of different commitments is mutual enrichment and enhancement of respect and appreciation rather than the hope that the person spoken to will prove to be wrong in what he regards as sacred” (p. 13). Griffiths defines apologetics (in its “positive” form) as “a discourse designed to show that the ordered set of doctrine-expressing sentences constituting a particular religious community’s doctrines is cognitively superior, in some important respect(s), to that constituting another religious community’s doctrines.” It is revealing that Griffiths uses the metaphors of battle to describe the process: “Where negative apologetics mans the barricades, positive apologetics takes the battle to the enemy’s camp” (Apology, p. 14). He later describes the other side as “the adversary.” While he may be speaking metaphorically here, the implications of this attitude are still troubling.  

38 Heschel, p. 15.  


40 Another way to put this, using Christian terms, is that revelation is ongoing. Hocking tells us that this is one of the meanings of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit — what he calls “the perpetual contemporaneousness, personalness and novelty of the unfolding of the meaning of its truth” (Hocking, p. 141). In other words, we come to see “accents of the Holy Spirit” in our encounter with others. In Buddhist language, we can see those from other traditions as bodhisattvas helping to guide us along our path — ultimately, we find, in the words of Reverend Tokuso Sakakibara, “bodhisattvas everywhere.” Each tradition has its own way of pointing to the sacralit of each human existence, demanding that we pay reverential attention to the human presence before us — after all, that person contains the *imago dei*, that individual possesses Buddha Nature.  

41 Griffiths does write that “the expectations of the apologist may properly be for both vindication and victory.” This is a stance that concerns me. Imagine if your dialogue partners always had this attitude (in the academy, we all know people like this); there are numerous reasons why this approach is not the most productive. However, he also writes (in *Apology*, though not in “Polemics”) that these are not the most important benefits to be gained from engagement in apologetics” (p. 80). He believes that the participants should shape their expectations “partly in terms of problem-solving and learning...” Griffiths’ book ends on a note that suggests that perhaps, in the end, our positions might end up being fairly close. Griffiths writes (and the tone differs from that of his later “Polemics”), “I can also see possibilities for a broader Buddhist enrichment of my Christian understanding of the processes by which the experienced facts of self-identity come to occur. Appropriation and creative borrowing are just as important as engagement in positive and negative apologetics; neither need exclude the other, just as long as both are taken with intellectual seriousness and argumentative passion” (pp. 107-8). In Apology, Griffiths not only discusses, but demonstrates the spirit in which polemic should be carried out. His challenge has made me continuously reflect on and revise my position, and for that reason I have found him to be a valuable interlocutor here.  

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