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## The 2006 Meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies

Washington, DC, November 17–18, 2006

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The theme of this year's meeting was "Religious Self-Fashioning and the Role of Community in Contemporary Buddhist and Christian Practice." The first session presented participants with three papers. The first compared Christian and Buddhist groups that fostered community and long-term commitment. A second paper developed the theme of community affiliation with a description of the Buddhist practice of Hoza. And a third paper demonstrated how a dual practitioner could minister pastorally to both Buddhists and Christians. In the second session practical and philosophical foci met in the discussion of papers on individualized vs. Sangha Buddhism in the United States and co-origination and universal intersubjectivity in Buddhist and Christian philosophies. It was a rich feast indeed.

Dr. Sandra Costen Kunz presented her paper "Christian and Buddhist Confession, Affiliation, and Countercultural Action" to start off the first session. In a study of Christian and Buddhist groups, she found interesting methodological parallels in the process that groups undertook to build commitment and community among followers of each tradition. Focused on specific congregations, her paper served to illustrate a trend toward community building that has broad implications for both Buddhist and Christian institutions in their work of fostering commitment and nurturing faith in participants.

Dr. Gene Reeves continued along the same theme with a description of the Buddhist practice of Hoza in his particular Buddhist community in Japan. A weekly practice of meeting together to help one another demonstrates a deeper philosophical belief that all can become bodhisattvas for others. Within the hierarchical Buddhist institutional structure, the meetings around Hoza display an egalitarianism that empowers ordinary people to see the Buddha nature in others and to realize it in themselves. In addition to empowering individuals, that process of mutual aid also solidifies the group.

According to both papers, individual practice of religion, be it Buddhist or

Christian, and a group process of social solidification work together to deepen faith and community.

The third paper in this first session showed the results of that individual/social dialectic in the life of Dr. Duane Bidwell, who presented his paper "Practicing the Religious Self: Buddhist-Christian Identity as Social Artifact." The main emphasis of this paper was that religion, as a socially constructed reality, depends on community even in its most individualistic forms. As Buddhism and Christianity develop their traditions, those socially constructed worlds can be penetrated by one who traverses between the two worlds. Two stories of pastoral care demonstrated his point. First, in a Buddhist setting, Bidwell, although perceived as a Christian, drew on his Buddhist practices to comfort the dying. In the second example, the situation was reversed. In a setting in which Christianity was the expected form, Bidwell drew on those resources to worship around the deathbed of a young man.

In her response to those three papers, Dr. Sallie King brought a critical dimension into the discourse as she asked questions concerning authority and decision making in each context. "How is consensus decision making balanced with hierarchical power in the groups studied?" she asked Dr. Kunz. "Given the equalizing power of Hoza, why is Reeves's organization so hierarchical?" was her question to Dr. Reeves. "And how," she asked, "did choice enter into Bidwell's religious identity?" Responses to those queries led to an interesting discussion that provided food for thought for participants in this meeting.

The second session opened with Dr. Kenneth Tanaka's study "The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: An Examination of 'Individualized Religion.'" Dr. Tanaka spoke to both communal and individualized dimensions of American Buddhism by analyzing a sangha in Alameda County, California, and contrasted it with the Buddhist practices of converts who did not participate in a sangha. He showed that identity for sangha members in Alameda was primarily related to selective joining of group activities by members. In the case of converts, his research showed that their Buddhist identity was most strongly related to meditative practices. A high level of commitment to those practices, with a goal of spiritual development, marked the converts who were not active participants in a sangha. By contrast, the participation in group activities was primary in focusing the Buddhist identity of sangha members. Tanaka sees the ideal commitment to Buddhism as a balance between commitment to individual practice for spiritual development and a commitment to activities of a sangha that enable connection to the rich traditions of Buddhism.

A most interesting discussion about theoretical and practical aspects of the relation of individuals to religious communities was generated by the juxtaposition of Tanaka's paper with the final paper, "Dependent Co-Origination and Universal Intersubjectivity," presented by Dr. Joseph Bracken. This presentation put forward a new paradigm of intersubjectivity that built on concepts of Buddhist co-origination and Whiteheadian process theology. Rather than envision a transcendent Trinity or a monistic unity beyond the reach of human understand-

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ing, Bracken presented a view of interconnected subjectivities operating in hierarchical fields. According to this paradigm, activity in overlapping fields ultimately influences all other fields in a vast relationality of mutuality.

Discussion of those two papers led both to a better understanding of the evolutionary/intersubjective paradigm and also to an illustration of that process in the concrete study of Tanaka. As new forms of Buddhism develop and new integrations among communal and individual aspects of Buddhism connect, the shifting patterns of interconnecting fields invigorate current forms and produce new ones.

Those insights can be applied to the papers from the first session as well. Kunz's study of Christian and Buddhist congregations suggested that new methods to retain members and deepen spiritual commitment may also be seen as small steps to more inclusive forms of religion. The practice of Hoza, as described by Reeves, also shows a form of Buddhist practice that enables individuals to see themselves in the larger scheme of things. Bidwell's experiences as a dual practitioner may also demonstrate a form of religion that is becoming more and more common as patterns of thought and action in overlapping fields throw up new socially constructed worlds of religious meaning.

Our theme of religious self-fashioning and the role of community in contemporary Buddhist and Christian practice revealed new insights that will benefit our dialogues for years to come.