



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Zen/Ch'an—Catholic Dialogue Opens New Quadrennium

Francis Tiso

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 27, 2007, pp. 147-150 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2007.0030>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220101>

## Zen/Ch'an—Catholic Dialogue Opens New Quadrennium

Francis V. Tiso

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

The first in a second quadrennium of dialogues between Catholics and Buddhists on the West Coast was held at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Ukiah, California, on the topic “Abiding in Christ, Taking Refuge in the Buddha.” The January 24–27, 2007, meeting was cochaired by Venerable Rev. Heng Sure of the Institute for World Religions, Berkeley, California, and by the Rev. Canon Francis V. Tiso, associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Fr. Tiso was substituting for the Catholic cochair, M. R. John C. Wester, auxiliary bishop of San Francisco and newly designated bishop of Salt Lake City, Utah.

The dialogue began with a public session, attended by Ukiah religious leadership and by monastics, students, and faculty of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas (established by the late Ven. Master Hsüan Hua [1918–1995]). A panel of participants discussed the unique features of this dialogue, linking it to the original intention of Venerable Master Hua to promote interreligious dialogue, based on his long friendship with Paul Cardinal Yü Bin. In particular, the panel explored those great themes of our respective traditions that have been at the heart of our previous four years of dialogue: “Walking the Bodhisattva Path/Walking the Christ Path” (2003); “Transformation of Hearts and Minds: Approaches to Precepts” (2004); “Practice: Means Toward Transformation” (2005); and “Meeting on the Path” (2006). These dialogues have built strong bonds of friendship and have contributed to a deeper understanding of one another’s terminologies, histories, and practices. The participants are now moving into a new series of dialogues that will ask religious questions arising from the conditions of contemporary secular culture.

In the course of two days of spiritual exercises and closed-session dialogues, the participants examined the basis of Christian and Buddhist commitments. The Buddhist refuge practice, entailing “taking refuge in, or relying upon, the Buddha, his Teachings, and the enlightening Community” (the Three Jewels of Buddha, dharma, and sangha), was paired with the Catholic Sacraments of Initiation (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist): both constitute the basis for entry

into the spiritual life, and both continue to impact the integration of faith with daily life.

Fr. Robert Hale of New Camaldoli Monastery, Big Sur, California, developed the topic of “Abiding in Christ” in writings of St. John and St. Paul in the New Testament. The classic images of organic unity—the vine and the branches, the body and its members—are the primary metaphors on which the New Testament writers base their presentation of abiding in Christ. The New Testament is rich in the language of embodiment, incorporation, enfleshment, and participation, even as it borrows the images of the guest, the friend, the beloved, and the spouse from Hebrew prophetic writings. All the relational images refer to the Christian’s participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, conferred in the sacrament of baptism. Because the metaphors are relational, they direct our attention to a dynamic participation in the shared love of God, which constitutes our deepest center and true self. All ascetic practice is ordered to that end: the gracious, divinizing participation in the life of God. Practices of the spiritual life dispose the Christian to receive the gift of divine life more fully, consciously, and fruitfully. Even the “language” of spiritual life is provisional and, as it were, “a stuttering,” meant more to nudge human consciousness more deeply into communion with the gift given as “mystery” than to define stages and states of mystical attainment.

Venerable Rev. Heng Ch’ih of Gold Buddha Monastery, Vancouver, British Columbia, examined the nature of faith as the basis for taking refuge in Buddha, dharma, and sangha in the Ch’an Buddhist tradition. One makes the choice of taking refuge on the basis of a faith that has been matured through reflection. The phenomenology of the act of taking refuge entails going before a qualified spiritual preceptor, who performs the rite in accordance with the traditions of the lineage. The prior action of reflection can then unfold in meditative practice, which is the way to actualize one’s inherent potential (i.e., Buddha-nature, which is shared by all sentient beings), which is the capacity to attain enlightenment. Faith itself is thus seen as intensifying confidence, reliance, or certitude. One of the key features acknowledged by our Mahayana Buddhist participants was the theme of maturation: one takes refuge not merely out of obligation or family custom, but as a personal response to the good impulses that have been developing over a long period of time within one’s consciousness; one’s karma has ripened to this point and will continue to develop within the “sphere” of the Three Jewels (Buddha, dharma, and sangha).

The dialogue moved into a discussion of similarities and differences in Christian Trinitarian theology and Buddhist teachings on the three bodies of the Buddha (Trikaya), because these are the transcendent “objects” of adherence that need to be understood so as to appreciate their ritualization. The conversation revisited crucial Buddhist and Christian terminology as presented in the 2004 meeting by Rev. Heng Sure and by Fr. Francis Tiso.

Gelong Lozang Monlam of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Teachings (a branch of Tibetan Gelukpa practice) situated the rite of tak-

ing refuge in the context of the Stages of the Path (*lam rim*), motivated by the quest for authentic happiness for and by all beings. Authentic happiness requires distancing oneself from actions leading to rebirth in lower realms of karma-driven existence. Attainment of happiness constitutes acquiring the qualities of a fully enlightened Buddha. In its ritual context, the act of taking refuge engages one's subjective awareness of the maturation of roots of goodness along with the use of external "supports" for one's ritual gestures, for example, prostrations before a statue of the Buddha or a scroll painting of the Refuge Assembly. The description of ritual objects led to a lively discussion of the use of statues and other physical objects in contemplative practice.

From the ethical perspective, one accompanies the ritual act with an inner determination to take responsibility for one's deeds and to renounce self-victimization and blaming others. Gelong Monlam outlined the rite and its obligations, comparing it to the rite of taking lay precepts and to the rites of tantric commitment at more advanced stages of practice. These higher commitments reflect one's growing awareness of the implications of engaging the path of a bodhisattva in the context of a deepening teacher-disciple relationship.

Fr. Tiso presented a pastoral perspective on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in order to underscore its "normative" character for post-Vatican II Catholic initiation, comparing it to the Buddhist theme of "coming to subjective awareness of one's spiritual maturation," upon which one might awaken faith and take refuge in the Three Jewels. The practice of infant baptism, while sustaining the Christian conviction about grace as a divine initiative, may in practice obscure the aspect of the human faith response to the divine gift. Therefore, several features of the rites of adult and infant baptism seek to emphasize the need for personal faith, affirmed within the life of a concrete Catholic community.

This dialogue was rich in the range of topics discussed in relation to the basic themes presented. For example, we revisited some of the great dyads of the spiritual life: the distinction between cataphatic and apophatic spirituality, between the active life and the contemplative life, between attainment of wisdom and the practice of compassion, between verbalization and ineffability, between experience and that which transcends even the category of experience. There was great interest in the subject of our responsibilities in transmitting these teachings to our students and communities. How much can be adapted to contemporary circumstances? How much needs to be modeled in accord with tradition? What does it mean to be "in" a particular tradition? What does it mean to be "outside" the tradition? Are there "rules of thumb" for determining the authenticity of particular lineages and teachings? Do similar teachings provide sufficient evidence on which we can infer the existence of a common basis in human nature for spiritual attainments? Do similar moral values and signs of holiness in revered persons indicate a common basis for spirituality that is valid across traditions? What is the connection between doctrinal systems and living our spiritual paths on a daily basis? What is the value of the term "God" or "gods" in Bud-

dhist and Christian constructions of spiritual life? What aspects of women's spiritual lives are gender-specific? Can we learn anything about this from the lives and writings of women mystics? What is the relationship between conversion and spiritual transformation? What are the cultural and "atmospheric" distinctions that we note among lineages and great world traditions?

Next year's gathering is planned for January 30–February 2, 2008, at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California. The theme builds upon this year's efforts to understand "abiding and refuge" to ask "Then What?" Proposed presentations will explore the formation of clergy, monastics, spiritual directors, and teachers; lay training and leadership roles; social service as "path"; and the long-term signs of spiritual maturation. Two teams were assigned to the task of preparing innovative presentations. Part of each day will again be dedicated to silent meditation, Christian prayer and Eucharist, and guided contemplative exercises.

The 2007 meeting participants were Rev. Heng Sure, Rev. Canon Francis Tiso, Rev. Myo Lahey, Gelong Losang Monlam, Rev. Hozan Alan Senauke, Fr. Robert Hale, Ms. Lorraine Moriarty, Sr. Phyllis D'Anna, Sr. Mary Ann Donovan, Fr. Tom Devereaux, Dr. Ron Epstein, Fr. James Fredericks, Rev. Jan Chozen Bays, Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih, Dr. Snjezana Akpinar, Rev. Gigen Victoria Austin, Deacon Tom McGowan, and Dr. Martin Verhoeven.