

The Emptiness of Interfaith Dialogue

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“The Relationship of Buddhism To Other Religions: the Search for Common Ground”

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INTRODUCTION

It is a great honour for me to be with you, Bahais and truth-seekers, this evening to lead this dinner discussion, especially when we are so close to one of the holiest of Bahai festivals, namely, the **Anniversary of the Declaration of the Bab**. As Bahais know, the Bab reveal his mission for the first time to his first disciple, Mulla Husayn, two hours after sunset on the night of 22/23 May, 1844, in Shiraz, Iran. That was 157 years ago, and on behalf of my Buddhist friends, I extend my Bahai friends, the felicitations of this most sacred event.

DISPUTED QUESTIONS

One interesting feature about contemporary Buddhism is that we generally are getting better exponents from the West and from non-Buddhists, especially the specialist scholars. A good example is John Hick’s *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: YUP, 1993), from which I have culled his interesting comments on Buddhism and summarized them. I have only magnified those areas that he has not covered with regards to our topic today. So if I appear to stand tall, it is because I’m standing on the shoulders of a giant.

There is a continuing attempt in the religious dialogue circle to agree on a common list of doctrines or truths that all can agree on. This is no easy task but with growing openness in dialogue, some insightful meeting points are beginning to appear. We shall look at this important development in due course, but first I would like to deal with the essentials. That is to say, by way of disregarding the inessentials. Let us examine what are essential to spiritual liberation, and what are not.

1 UNDETERMINED QUESTIONS

In Buddhist teachings, we can identify two kinds of religious questions: (1) Unanswered; (2) Unanswerable. These questions relate to the 10 speculative views:

1. The world is eternal.
2. The world is not eternal.
3. The world is (spatially) infinite.
4. The world is not (spatially) infinite.
5. The soul (*jīva*) is identical with the body.
6. The soul is not identical with the body.
7. The Tathagata (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death.
8. The Tathagata does not exist after death.
9. The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death.
10. The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death.

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1.1 UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Views 1-6 are unanswered, because they are not soteriologically relevant. These questions have true answers although we do not know them. However, these answers are not relevant for liberation, for someone striving for Nirvana.

In the Cūḷa.māluṅkya Sutta (M no. 63), we have the monk Māluṅkya throwing this challenge to the Buddha:

[Malunkya.putta:]

If the Lord knows that the world is eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is eternal.

If the Lord knows that the world is not eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is not eternal.

If the Lord does not know whether the world is eternal or whether the world is not eternal,

then, not knowing, not seeing, this would be honest, namely to say, “I do not know, I do not see.” (M 1:431)

The BUDDHA’S REPLY is most enlightening: “Did we agree that I would answer these questions when you became a monk?” the Buddha asks Malunkya, who has of course, has to answer no! Then the Buddha went on to give a parable which hits home the point of renunciation, that is, to work towards the realization of the true nature of suffering and so attaining spiritual liberation.

Briefly, the parable of the man wounded with a poisoned arrow is about a man who was shot with a poisoned arrow. It would be most unwise of him or the doctor who is summoned to ask such questions as where did the arrow come from, who shot the arrow, what was the arrow made of, and so on. The immediate urgent task is to pull out the poisoned arrow. Otherwise, the wounded man would surely die.

The significance of pulling out the poisoned arrow is that it points to the centrality of the Four Noble Truths. They are all that is necessary for spiritual liberation.

1.2 UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

Views 7-10 (the state of the Tathagata) are unanswerable, because they are “inapplicable” to the entire range of possible answers in terms of which these question are posed, namely:

[Of the Tathagata:]

“Arise,” Vaccha, does not apply.

Well then, good Gotama, does he not arise?

“Does not arise,” Vaccha, does not apply.

Well then, good Gotama, does he both arise and not arise?

“Both arises and does not arise,” Vaccha, does not apply.

Well then, good Gotama, does he neither arise nor not arise?

“Nether arise nor not arise,” Vaccha, does not apply. (M 2:486)

The Buddha then goes on to give the analogy of the extinguished flame. A fire burns depending on its fuel. When the fuel is gone, the fire is extinguished (one attains Nirvana). Now, in which direction has the flame gone? The answers do not apply. The moral here is that conventional language does not apply to the state of Nirvana.

1.3 ANALYSIS

The Unanswered Questions are logically valid questions whose answers are not yet known, not revealed by the Buddha. Maybe some day we might discover their answers. But still they would not conduce to salvation or liberation.

The Unanswerable Questions, on the other hand, are about realities that transcend the systems of categories available to our human thought and language. They are of the nature that

The Relationship of Buddhism to Other Religions (Piya Tan, 2001)

St. Paul declares: “No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

2 CONFLICTING TRUTH CLAIMS

John Hick identifies 3 kinds of conflicts in religious truth claims:

- (1) Conflict of historical truth-claims. [2.1]
- (2) Trans-historical issues. [2.2]
- (3) Conceptions of ultimate reality. [2.3]

2.1 CONFLICT OF HISTORICAL TRUTH-CLAIMS

(1) Historical example of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19:21; 2 Kings 1, 2).

Elijah (fl. 9th cent. BC), the Hebrew prophet was credited with saving the Yahweh religion from corruption by nature worship of Baal. Elijah proclaimed that there was no reality except the God of Israel, stressing monotheism to the people.

Elijah’s conflict with the priests of Baal may be a valid conflict for the Jews and Christians. However, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or Confucianist scriptures are not concerned either to confirm or deny this: **it belongs to a different universe of discourse from their own.**

(2) Inter-traditional conflicts of historical beliefs.

Indeed, even when two religions share the same source of faith, each may view the source differently. Let’s take a few important examples:

Christ’s crucifixion:

The Christians believe that Christ died on the cross.

The Muslims believe that he only appeared to die.

Mt. Moriah sacrifice.

The Jews believe it was Isaac whom Abraham was going to sacrifice (Heb 11:17).

The Muslims believe that it was his brother, Ishmael, who was nearly sacrificed on Mt. Moriah.

The Pope problem.

The Catholics and Protestants dispute as to whether Jesus appointed Peter as the head of his church and whether the popes are Peter’s successors in this office.

Sunni-Shia dispute.

The Sunni and Shia Muslims dispute as to whether Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor in the leadership of the Muslim Ummah.

2.2 TRANS-HISTORICAL ISSUES.

By “transhistorical”, Hick means that “which are not settleable, even in principle, by historical or other empirical evidence.” Some questions within this category are unanswered questions (“whether the universe is eternal”), while others are unanswerable (the state of the Tathagata after death).

Significance of Buddha’s stand

Since “unanswered questions” are not relevant to spiritual liberation, they are left unanswered. Questions such as the origin of the universe, etc., may be answered one day. But it would still have no relevance to spiritual liberation. In this case, Hick makes an important remark:

...no scientific knowledge can in itself be religiously significant except in so far as the religions unwisely adopt dogmatic views, as they have some times done, on questions in astronomy, geology, astrophysics or any other of the special sciences.

(Hick 1993: 111)

Hick goes on to remark that the physical universe is “religiously ambiguous, in the sense that everything we know or can conceive of knowing about its physical structure and workings is capable of being construed both religiously and naturalistically.” (1993 id. My emphasis).

The Relationship of Buddhism to Other Religions (Piya Tan, 2001)

2.3 REBIRTH DOCTRINE AS AN UNDETERMINED ISSUE

Interestingly Hick proposes that the doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth be classified as an “undetermined issue” (i.e. not necessary for salvation or liberation). The Buddha, of course, does not take this stand. He has given clear teachings on rebirth.

Its Buddhist clarity notwithstanding, the rebirth doctrine conflicts with traditional Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Bahai beliefs, and with contemporary Western naturalism. Thus taken on a global scale, we have to categorise rebirth as one of the undetermined issues.

On the other hand, if we examine the Buddhist teachings a little more deeply, Hick will find more Buddhists agreeing with him than disagreeing. Let me point to an indisputable piece of scriptural evidence—what is popularly called “the parable of the handful of leaves” (which Hick fails to mention):

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī in a *siṅsapā* (*Dalbergia sisu*) grove. Then the Blessed One took up a few *siṅsapā* leaves in his hand and addressed the monks thus:

“What do you think, monks, which is more numerous: these few *siṅsapā* leaves that I have taken up in my hand or those in the *siṅsapā* grove overhead?”

“Venerable sir, the *siṅsapā* leaves that the Blessed One has taken up in his hand are few, but those in the *siṅsapā* grove overhead are numerous.”

“So too, monks, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, monks, have I not taught those many things? Because they are unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment [with the world], to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. Therefore I have not taught them.

“And what have I taught? I have taught: ‘This is suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the origin of suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; I have taught: ‘This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.’

“And why, monks, have I taught this? Because this is beneficial, relevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. Therefore I have taught them.

“Therefore, monks, make an effort to understand [these four Noble Truths].”

(S 5:438 f)

This passage gives us a broad hint that the Buddha is at least **near-omniscient**. I venture to say that he probably knows all the answers to the unanswerable questions, but he is not telling. I can say this merrily without fear or favour, without being labeled a sinner or a blasphemer.

It is not that this last concept (omniscience) is alien to Buddhism (which indeed it is not), but more importantly that such a statement has nothing to do with salvation. It is a speculative statement, perhaps useful in promoting religious dialogue.

2.4 CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE REALITY

It is difficult to find a common ground that all religions can agree on. The Buddhists reject the idea of a creator God. On the other hand, to envision a “universal Nirvana” towards which all beings move is to violate what is known within the Buddhist tradition.

Hick proposes the Buddhist term *śūnyatā*, “emptiness” (that is, something that transcends conceptualization) as the ultimate reality, the Real. This ultimate reality manifests itself in Buddhism in the doctrine of Dependent Origination:

The 12-link formula of Dependent Origination (*pratitya samutpāda*):

1. Dependent on ignorance arise mental formations.
2. Dependent on mental formations arises consciousness.
3. Dependent on consciousness arise mind and matter.

The Relationship of Buddhism to Other Religions (Piya Tan, 2001)

4. Dependent on mind and matter arise the six sense-bases.
5. Dependent on the six sense-bases arises contact.
6. Dependent on contact arises feeling.
7. Dependent on feeling arises craving.
8. Dependent on craving arises clinging.
9. Dependent on clinging arises becoming.
10. Dependent on becoming arises birth.
11. Dependent on birth, arise:
12. decay and death: there also arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

The Dependent Origination formula not only explains personality development but also rebirth.

By “birth” (*jāti*) is meant not only birth in the physiological sense, but all types of “generation.” Just as all the other factors of the Dependent Origination series must be understood as parallel, interdependent streams of processes running throughout one’s life, so birth, too, is a continuous process. In which case, “death”, too, is a continuous process, since they are interconnected.

The Loka Sutta

In the **Loka Sutta**, the Buddha gives a shorter version of Dependent Origination, beginning with the 6 senses:

Dependent on the **eye** and **forms**, eye consciousness arises, and the coming together of the three is contact.

Dependent on contact, there arises feeling.

Dependent on feeling there arises craving.

Dependent on craving there arises clinging.

Dependent on clinging, there arises becoming.

Dependent on becoming, there arises birth.

Dependent on birth there will be decay and death, grief, lamenting, suffering and despair. — **This is the origin of the world.**

Dependent on the **ear** and **sounds**, sound consciousness arises, and the coming together of the three is contact...

The same is repeated of “nose and odours”, “tongue and tastes”, “body and impressions” and “mind and mind-objects.” (S 2:73)

Universality of *śūnyatā*

Let us humour Hick by regarding *śūnyatā* as the ultimate reality, in itself inexperienceable and beyond the scope of human conceptuality (1993:114). But it can be experienced in a range of different ways made possible by the different spiritual disciplines and systems of religious thought:

There are Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu and other theistic experiences of *śūnyata* as a personal deity. There is the advaitic Hindu experience of *śūnyata* as Brahman. And there is the Mahayana Buddhist experience of *śūnyata* as the world-process, *pratitya-samutpada*.

(Hick, 1993:114)

Of course, this is not the only authentic mode of experience of the ultimate, but there is a range of it, Hick adds.

3 Wisdom and maturity

It would be a mark of great wisdom and maturity to frankly admit our spiritual ignorance. With regards to these unanswered questions, there is a wide range of possibilities. We should not try to insist that everyone must affirm the position that most appeals to us. Rather we should realize that it is not necessary for salvation or liberation to know whether, for example, the universe has a beginning and will have an end (as is common in Western thought) or whether on the contrary it goes on in an endless series of cycles (as is generally supposed in Eastern thought). To regard such questions as soteriologically significant can only hinder the salvation or liberation process.

I would like to close by letting John Hick the last say, with his philosophical humour:

... it would be a mark of wisdom and maturity to accept our ignorance. We do not know, for example, the nature of the ultimate eschatological state - whether it is a state of what we now call ourselves, whether it is in what we know as space or in what we now know as time, and so on. The questions that we pose about it may be so utterly wide of the mark that any answers to them are worse than useless.

If a caterpillar could ask, concerning its own future post-chrysalis state, how many legs it will then have, how fast it will be able to walk, and what kind of leaves it will be able to eat, the Buddha would say, "Number of legs, speed of walking, eating of leaves, Vaccha, do not apply. Freed from denotation by caterpillar consciousness is the butterfly."
(John Hick 1993:115. Reparagraphed)

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