

Preface

Much has been written about process Buddhist-Christian dialogue. In all probability much more will be written. But thus far no author has published a book about contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue from the perspective of Whiteheadian process thought, although process philosophers and theologians have written numerous essays on the topic. Nor have many writers sought to expand the current Buddhist-Christian dialogue into a “trilogue” by means of bringing the natural sciences into the discussion as a “third partner,” which was the topic of my *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in an Age of Science*. My thesis in *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* is that Buddhist-Christian dialogue in all three of its forms—conceptual, social engagement, and interior—are interdependent processes, the nature of which is helpfully characterized through the categories of Whiteheadian process thought. Process thought asserts that process is fundamental to not only human experience, but to the structure of reality, “the way things and events really are.” I have appropriated some of the categories of Whitehead’s process metaphysics throughout the specific chapters in this book as a means of analyzing contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue and this dialogue’s encounter with the natural sciences. Accordingly, references to the Whiteheadian foundations of my understanding of the process of Buddhist-Christian dialogue support each chapter of this book.

Chapter 1, “That We May Know Each Other,” argues that what philosopher John Hick called “the pluralist hypothesis,” when stripped of its Kantian assumptions and reinterpreted in the categories of Whitehead’s understanding of God, offers the most coherent framework from which to interpret our post-modern experience of religious pluralism. As a means of demonstrating this thesis I have also appropriated philosopher of science Imre Lakatos’ account of the methodology of scientific research programs. The goal of this

chapter is to clarify the foundational assumptions underlying my particular account of contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Chapters 2–5 are historical in nature because in these chapters I offer a descriptive summary of the three interdependent forms of Buddhist-Christian dialogue that have emerged to this date. My intention is to demonstrate the specific structures of process Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Chapter 2, “The Structure of Buddhist-Christian Conceptual Dialogue,” summarizes important Buddhist and Christian writers who have emphasized this form of dialogue in their conversations. The focus of conceptual dialogue is doctrinal, theological, and philosophical because it focuses on a religious community’s collective self-understanding and worldview. In conceptual dialogue, Buddhists and Christians compare and contrast theological and philosophical formulations on such questions as ultimate reality, human nature, suffering and evil, the role of the historical Jesus in Christian faith and practice, the role of the Buddha in Buddhist teaching and practice, and what Buddhists and Christians might learn and appropriate from one another.

The title of chapter 3 is “Conceptual Dialogue with the Natural Sciences.” Its thesis is that including the natural sciences into conceptual, socially engaged, and interior Buddhist-Christian dialogue as a third partner will engender new processes of creative transformation in both Buddhist and Christian traditions. “Buddhist-Christian Socially Engaged Dialogue” is the topic of chapter 4. Buddhist-Christian conceptual dialogue has generated deep interest in the relevance of dialogue for issues of social, environmental, economic, and gender justice. Since these issues are systemic, global, interconnected, and interdependent, they are neither religion-specific nor cultural-specific. Accordingly, this chapter is a description of how Buddhists and Christians have mutually apprehended common experiences and resources for working together to help human beings liberate themselves and nature from the global forces of systemic oppression.

Chapter 5, “Buddhist-Christian Interior Dialogue,” is about how in the human struggle for liberation Buddhist and Christians share an experiential “common ground” that enables them to hear one another and be mutually transformed in the process. The emphasis of this chapter is Buddhist and Christian practice traditions—meditation and centering prayer traditions. Finally in chapter 6, “Creative Transformation at the Boundaries,” I bring Buddhist-Christian dialogue and dialogue with the natural sciences into confrontation with “boundary questions” that are generated by Buddhism’s and Christianity’s structuring worldviews in relation to scientific boundary

questions. It is in this chapter that I discuss the issues of transcendence in Christianity, Buddhism, and the natural sciences as a means of establishing a foundation for an ongoing process of Buddhist-Christian-science trilogue that is at present only beginning to occur.

At this juncture, it would be helpful to clarify meaning of “dialogue” as I understand this term before proceeding further. For most persons dialogue is a process, to appropriate the words of John S. Dunn, of “passing over and returning.”¹ In interreligious dialogue we pass over into the lives of persons whose religious traditions are different than our own, appropriate what we can into our own lives, identify what cannot be appropriated, and return to our own faith community. In the process, our intellects are stretched and our imaginations deepened, or, in the language of process theology, “creatively transformed.” And since the purpose of interreligious dialogue is most often the renewal of one’s own faith commitments and faith community—otherwise why engage in dialogue at all?—at least four conditions must be met before such creative transformation can occur.

First, no ulterior motives of any sort should be the incentive for engaging in dialogue. Approaching another religious standpoint with hidden agendas provides only limited results, usually more negative than positive. For example, engaging in dialogue with a Buddhist merely for the purpose of comparing Buddhist doctrine and practice with Christian doctrine and practice in order to evangelize Buddhists undermines the integrity of Christian and Buddhist tradition. Engaging in dialogue in order to convert persons to one’s own particular faith tradition is a monologue, not a dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is not missionary.

Second, dialogical engagement with persons dwelling in faith communities other than our own enriches our faith and practice, as well as the faith and practices of our dialogical partner. Nothing valuable can emerge from interreligious dialogue unless our perspectives are genuinely challenged, tested, and stretched by the faith and practice of our dialogical partner. Approaching other religious persons merely as advocates of our own faith commitments and community confuses dialogue with monologue and engenders religious imperialism.

Third, interreligious dialogue demands accurate, critical, and articulate understanding of our own faith traditions as well as the traditions of our dialogical partner. The process of creative transformation through dialogue rests upon being engaged by the truth claims of our own religious traditions

1. Dunn, *The Way of All the Earth*, iv.

well as the truth claims of our dialogical partners. For without a point of view critically held, dialogue with others is transformed into a mere sharing of ideas—we share our views and our partners share theirs, and nothing of value is achieved. Individuals who have heard the lyrics and music of their own faith communities are more likely to hear and understand the music and lyrics of a tradition other than their own. It's a bit like being in love. As our own experiences of giving and receiving love allows us to apprehend and appreciate love experienced by other human beings, so our own religious experiences, critically understood, allow us to enter into the ideas and experiences of persons participating in religious traditions other than our own.

Finally, dialogue is a quest for truth where “truth” is understood as relational in structure. Truth can have no confessional boundaries in a universe governed by general and special relativity. Interreligious dialogue is meaningful as it grows out of our common humanity as persons whose sense of what it means to be human expresses itself through different, yet valid and real, encounters with the Sacred, however the Sacred is named. This does not imply that all truth claims have equal truth-value. In dialogue we become aware not only of similarities, but differences between ourselves and other persons. For this reason alone, dialogue is not for the intellectually or spiritually fainthearted. We are never the same person after a dialogue as we were before we entered into dialogue. The truths we believe, the assumptions we have, the experiences we have undergone, will be challenged, after which we return “home” to our own faith traditions with fewer exclusivist assumptions about religious standpoints other than our own. But even here, there are no guarantees. Some persons may not return to their traditions after passing over into another. The contemporary history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is replete with Christians who have passed over into Buddhism and made Buddhism their spiritual home. Buddhists who have dialogically passed over into Christian traditions have sometimes remained in the Christian community. Some Buddhists and Christians have acquired a dual religious identity as “Buddhist-Christian” or “Christian-Buddhist.” Whether one remains in one's own community or enters another community or acquires a multiple religious identity through the practice of interreligious dialogue, the process of creative transformation through dialogue has been at work.

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to my daughter and her husband, Gail Ingram Kinner and David Charles Kinner, and their young son, David Christian, and my son, Robert William Ingram. The grace of their lives continually flows into my wife's and my lives in ways that often stuns us to silence. Finally, my wife, Regina Inslee Ingram, has always supported my work and is the center of my life around which everything I hold dear revolves. She is the glue that holds my family together.

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