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Introduction to the Special Issue of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

LAI PAN-CHIU

The papers published in this special issue of *Ching Feng*, which comprises volume 4, number 2 and volume 5, number 1 of the new series, were presented at the International Conference on the Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. The conference was held at Xi'an, China, during the period 21–24 November 2003, and was jointly organized by four institutions, namely, the Buddhist Research Institute, Shaanxi Normal University (Xi'an); the Religion Research Institute, Xi'an International University (Xi'an); the Centre for the Study of Morality and Religion, Tsinghua University (Beijing); and the former Department of Religion at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The conference originally had been planned to be held in Beijing in June 2003, but due to the outbreak of SARS, it was postponed until November 2003 and the venue was changed to Xi'an in Shaanxi Province. Unfortunately, the change made it impossible for many scholars to attend personally, even though some had already submitted their papers.

The conference is full of historical significance. Firstly, it was held at a city which played a key role in the history of the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity in China. Xi'an, the capital of China during the Tang dynasty and a then leading international metropolis, was the foremost centre for Buddhist studies at that time as well as the place

where the famous Nestorian stele was unearthed. By having Xi'an as its venue, the conference seemed to have inherited and revived the tradition of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in China. Secondly, ours was probably the first academic conference for Buddhist-Christian dialogue held in modern China. In spite of financial restraints and the geographical remoteness of Xi'an (at least in comparison with Beijing), the conference was attended by scholars of Buddhism and Christianity from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States, Korea, Norway, etc. This indicates that Buddhist-Christian dialogue in China has acquired an international, cross-cultural and ecumenical character and is to be considered part of the global dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.

The eight papers[†] selected from among the thirty-three papers presented at the conference are either written by Chinese scholars or address an issue that is directly related to the Chinese context. However, this Chinese slant does not overshadow the conference's global perspective. In terms of scope, those eight papers cover philosophical, doctrinal, spiritual and historical aspects of the encounter. The historical treatments cover the historical encounter between Buddhism and Christianity from pre-modern to contemporary China, representing most of the major periods. The studies of philosophical and spiritual issues undertaken by Chinese scholars have employed resources from Japan and the West.

Dr. Andrew K. Chung's 鄭安德 contribution gives an account of the historical encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in Ming-Qing China. Two papers address the Buddhist-Christian encounter in Republican China. Professor Notto R. Thelle's paper depicts the way in which Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877–1952) changed his mindset from the desire zealously to convert Chinese Buddhists into an attitude of openness to Buddhists. While Professor Thelle provides a case study from the Christian side, Dr. Xue Yu's 學愚 paper presents the case of Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), an eminent Buddhist monk active in the Republican era, with special reference to Taixu's view on Christianity.

In addition to these historical studies of Buddhist-Christian encounter, two papers address the recent encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. Professor He Jianming's 何建明 paper offers an analysis of the recent dialogue between the Modern Chan Society, a Buddhist organization in Taiwan, and the China Lutheran Seminary, which is connected with

[†] The papers by Dr. Andrew K. Chung, Professor Li Xiangping, Professor Lai Shen-chon, and Dr. Ekman Tam are issued in the second part of this special issue, published as volume 5, number 1.

Areopagos, a Scandinavian Christian organization well-known for its commitment to dialogue with Buddhism. The paper by Professor Li Xiangping 李向平 reports a field study conducted in southern China concerning the social interactions between Buddhists and Christians and their respective attitudes towards each other.

While these five papers have a more historical/empirical orientation, the remaining papers are relatively more focused upon the philosophical/spiritual aspects. Dr. Au Kin Ming's 區建銘 paper consists of a philosophical comparison of Paul Tillich, a world-renowned Christian theologian, and Kitarō Nishida, a representative of the Kyoto school, which is famous for its integrating Buddhism with Western philosophy. The paper by Professor Lai Shen-chon 賴賢宗 attempts a comparison between the Buddhist concept of emptiness and Christian philosophy, with special reference to representatives of the Kyoto school, including Keiji Nishitani, Eiko Hanaoka, Masao Abe, etc. In contrast to the conceptual comparison conducted in these two papers, Dr. Ekman Tam's 譚沛泉 paper concentrates on the spirituality of Chan Buddhism and Christianity, with special reference to Teresa of Avila and Thomas Merton.

Given the recent development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in China, especially the successful launching of this conference, which has opened a new chapter in the history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in China, the present editor, as one of the co-organizers of the conference, would like to supplement this special issue with an account of the role of Hong Kong in the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in China as a post-conference reflection on the conference.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the co-organizers of the conference, Professor Wu Yansheng 吳言生 (Shaanxi Normal University and Xi'an International University) and Professor Wang Xiaochao 王曉朝 (Tsinghua University), for their cooperation and support, which made the conference possible and successful.

It is the sincere hope of the present editor that Buddhist-Christian dialogue in China, with such a promising new beginning, will continue to prosper.