

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white sans-serif font on a blue rectangular background.

Buddhist-Christian Encounter and Dialogue among Civilizations: Introduction to the Special Issue

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Lai, Pan-chiu
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-24 11:42:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166209

Buddhist-Christian Encounter and Dialogue among Civilizations: Introduction to the Special Issue

LAI PAN-CHIU

Based on the increasing contacts among civilizations and in response to the challenge posted by Samuel Huntington's idea of clash of civilizations, people from different cultural backgrounds become aware of the importance and urgency of the dialogue among civilizations, especially among religions. Dialogue among civilizations is widely recognized as an indispensable, if not the most effective, way for their harmonious co-existence and prosperous development. The development of a civilization of dialogue in the 21st century is thus called for.

Among the major world religions, Buddhism and Christianity seem to represent two different types of culture or civilization. Both of them have made tremendous contributions to the development of "Eastern" and "Western" civilizations. In their respective histories of encountering other religions and development in different cultures, they have become two of the most globalized religions. Their historical encounter, without doubt, is an important part of the history of human civilizations (plural) or civilization (singular)—if one believes that human

LAI Pan-chiu (LAI Pinchao 賴品超) is professor in the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies; associate dean (education), Faculty of Arts; and associate director, Centre for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

civilization(s) will become one in the future.¹ The role of Buddhist-Christian encounter in the encounter, dialogue, or globalization of civilizations deserves to be studied in depth. Furthermore, their encounter in the contemporary world may shape the future direction of the development of human civilization(s). It is thus interesting to explore whether and how the two religions may provide spiritual resources for the dialogue among civilizations.

With these understandings, a Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference with the main theme “Dialogue of Civilizations: Buddhist-Christian Encounter of the 21st Century” was held at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China, from October 16 to 18, 2009. The conference was co-organized by the Centre for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, which contributed to the pre-conference preparation, and the Institute of Christianity and Cross-cultural Studies, Zhejiang University, which shouldered most of the logistics during the conference under the supervision of Prof. Wang Zhicheng, associate director of the Institute, to whom a special note of thanks has to go. A report of the conference summarizing the discussion at the conference has been published in a journal in Chinese.²

In a sense, this conference is a third sequel to the conference on Buddhist-Christian dialogue held in Xi'an in 2003.³ It was followed by the Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference in Hong Kong in 2006.⁴ Different from the conference in 2006, which has a rather particular theme of “Kingdom of God, Pure Land and the Human World,” this

¹ For a historical survey of their encounters in different cultures, see Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multi-Cultural History of Their Dialogue*, trans. Phyllis Jestice (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

² See Wang Rong 王蓉 and Wang Junfeng 王俊峰, *Wenming de duihua yu duihua de wenming: “Ershiyi shiji de Ye Fo duihua” xueshu yantaohui zongshu* 文明的對話與對話的文明——「21世紀的耶佛對話」學術研討會綜述 [Dialogue of Civilizations and Civilizations of Dialogue: International Conference on “Buddhist-Christian Encounter in the 21st Century], *Logos & Pneuma* 道風 33 (Autumn 2010): 319–330.

³ The papers for this conference were published as Wu Yansang 吳言生, Lai Pan-chiu and Wang Xiaochao 王曉朝, ed., *Fojiao yu Jidujiao duihua* 佛教與基督教對話 [Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005). Selected papers in English were published in two parts in *Ching Feng*, New Series, 4, no. 2 (2003): 111–239; and *Ching Feng*, New Series, 5, no. 1 (2004): 1–133.

⁴ The papers for this conference were published as Lai Pan-chiu and Xue Yu 學愚, ed., *Tianguo, jingtu yu renjian: Ye Fo duihua yu shehui guanhuai* 天國、淨土與人間——耶佛對話與社會關懷 [The Heavenly Kingdom, The Pure Land and the Human World: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and Social Concern] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008). Selected papers in English were published in *Ching Feng*, New Series, 7, no. 1–2 (2006): 1–246.

conference attempts to view Buddhist-Christian dialogue against the wider context of dialogue among civilizations.

The main theme of this conference is reminiscent of the work of Ninian Smart (1927–2001), particularly two of his numerous books. One of them is *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* (London: Collins, 1981), which is based on his Gifford Lectures delivered at Edinburgh University from 1979 to 1980. Though the title of the book seems to focus on western civilization, it affirms that Buddhist-Christian dialogue may play an important role in the shaping of western civilization and makes special reference to the Chinese experience in the modern world. Eight years later, he continued the discussion in another book, *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993). The book is based on his Martin Lectures delivered at the University of Hong Kong in 1989, a very important year for China. Again, the book makes extensive references to the case of modern China and argues that China did play and will play an important role in the dialogue among civilizations, including particularly Buddhist-Christian dialogue. It seems to be providential that these themes reappeared in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference held in China exactly twenty years after Smart's Martin Lectures delivered in Hong Kong.

More than twenty papers were presented at the conference and five of them were selected for publication in this special issue of *Ching Feng*. Since the encounter among religions takes place in the history of encounter of civilizations, it is appropriate to start this special issue with a historical study of the cultural background for Buddhist-Christian encounter. Alan Hunter's article "An Early World-Wide Web Religions of Eurasia" attempts to indicate that the Eurasia continent, since pre-history and up to around AD 500, was a pervasive cultural matrix in which many religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, interacted with each other. Though these religions kept their own identities, they also shared a rich cultural heritage, which includes symbols, religious ideas, ethical principles, religious practices, artistic expressions, etc.

Given the framework provided by Hunter's article, Dr. Chan Kim-kwong's article "Lotus and Swastika in Assyrian Church in China: Buddhist Legacy of Aryan Heritage?" offers a focused study of the Lotus and the Swastika as two concrete examples to illustrate the cross-cultural encounter. It argues that both the lotus and the swastika, which had been recognized by some scholars as an evidence for the influence of Buddhism on the Assyrian Church in China known as Jing

Jiao 景教, were actually not exclusively of Buddhism. Instead, they were inherited from the Aryan tradition via the Persians from Central Asia and were rather common among ancient civilizations.

These two articles illustrate in different ways how our understanding of Buddhist-Christian encounter in the ancient world may be enhanced through studying its cultural matrix, especially the interactions among civilizations. This may apply to their encounter in the modern world as well. The article co-authored by Lai Pan-chiu and Wang Tao on “Buddhist-Christian Encounter in the Age of Science: A Case Study of Modern Chinese Buddhism” attempts to indicate that the Chinese Buddhist responses to Christianity were shaped by their responses to modern science, and in reverse, their responses to modern science were also affected by their encounter with Christianity.

Whereas this article offers an analysis of the encounter among Buddhism, Christianity, and modern science in China, the article by Notto R. Thelle “The Humanization of ‘Buddhism: Aspects of Western Adaptations of Buddhism” focuses on the western reception of Buddhism. Similarly, the article shows that the ways the Western intellectuals received Buddhism were affected by their own cultural ethos, including particularly humanism. The article further reflects critically on whether the spiritual strength of Buddhism will be lost in this kind of reception. These two articles, though addressing the cases from different cultural contexts (Chinese and western) and focusing on different cultural factors (science and humanism), show how Buddhist-Christian encounter should better be understood against the context of cultural interactions in the modern world.

The final article on “Toward a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation: An Exercise on Inter-religious Theology” authored by Perry Schmidt-Leukel is not merely a contemporary but also a forward-looking inquiry. The article advocates for the study of inter-religious theology or what is also called comparative theology, and takes the theology of creation as a test-case to illustrate that though the two religions’ understandings of creation might seem to be incompatible, there are some significant similarities to be discovered. This kind of theological inquiry goes beyond the understanding as well as expectation of inter-religious dialogue as a means for the goal of peace making. It corresponds to the phenomenon of multiple belonging, which increasingly becomes common partially due to the dialogue of civilizations and may contribute to the materialization of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s vision of “world theology” as well as that of civilization of dialogue many people call for.