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# Dialogue or Communion?[1]
## What Buddhists and Christians Can Contribute in Responding to the Crisis of Humankind

## 1.    Introduction

The present crisis of humankind has different aspects. Depending on focus even more aspects can be distinguished. However, the following seem to be the most striking ones: ecological exploitation, economical injustice, cultural devastation, political segregation, psychological frustration. Each one is to be analyzed different-ly, and there seem to be only partial and most difficult concrete steps for solving the respective problems. However, it needs to be asked whether these aspects might be symptoms of a deeper crisis that can be identified as a general human problem. My thesis is that this is the case. It is human greed and ego-centredness based on a fun-damental ignorance that has not yet been overcome in human evolution. Humans, however, have not (yet) exhausted their potentials. It might be possible to change mind and life if there is really a will to do so. The potentials of Buddhist analysis and practice and Christian hope and mental conversion are not yet exhausted. They might be developed by a new understanding of communion and cooperation in de-veloping human life in such a way that a sustainable future is possible.

Historically speaking we have to look at the fundamental structures of Buddhism and Christianity both historically and phenomenologically without claiming any kind of essentialism. Both traditions are pluralistic within themselves. Let us look at some aspects which are fundamental for our question to be asked here:

a)  In Indian history Buddhism was a spiritual and social movement directed against the sacrificial religion and social status of the Brahmins. Thus, the classical reli-gious values were put under scrutiny in a Buddhist "hermeneutics of suspicion". The general result was: something or someone does not qualify to have a reli-gious "holiness" in itself or him/herself, but only in as much as the individual mental development makes him/her qualified. The classical statement of the Buddha to this effect was: "I do not call one a brahmana because of one`s origin, or one`s mother. Such is indeed arrogant, and is wealthy: but the poor who is free

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from attachments, that one indeed I call a brahmana…."[2] There is nothing holy except awakening to the true nature (*bodhi*) and, derived from that, all means and paths (*upāya*) that may be useful to attain this end, which is described as the extinction of desire, hatred and ignorance (*nirvāṇa*). Having said this one can conclude: The advent of the Buddha itself is – a crisis of the inherited religious value system.

In (early) Buddhism the basic experience towards life and the first tenet of the teaching is: *sabbam…aniccam…sabbam…dukkham … sabbam … anattā* (SN 35.43-44). All is impermanent, all is suffering and all is nonself.[3] The suffering is not in the circumstances themselves but in the mental attitude towards them. However, this attitude can be changed. Impermanence and change are natural, that is to say, change needs to be regarded as a finger pointing to the moon (of wisdom). Change is an opportunity for growth in insight into the impermanence of things. Impermanence needs to be realized in order to overcome clinging. To overcome clinging is essential to realize the emptiness of all phenomena including ego, which is wisdom (*prajñā*). This realization is the precondition for attaining the Buddhist goal of awakening, *bodhi* or *nirvāṇa*. Therefore, any crisis is an opportunity for the most essential spiritual realization. In this respect the 14th Dalai Lama often says: "For a person who cherishes compassion and love, the practice of tolerance is essential, and for that, an enemy is indispensable. So we should feel grateful to our enemies, for it is they who can best help us develop a tranquil mind! Also, it is often the case in both personal and public life, that with a change in circumstances, enemies become friends."[4]

b) Early Christianity was a movement critical of the religious establishment of its time. Jesus was sentenced to death because of his different views and practices concerning religion. His was a universal approach in contrast to a ritualistic approach of a particular people having a special relationship towards ultimate reality. Thus, his social and political criticism had a religious foundation. This was not an exclusivistic claim by the early Jesus movement, but there were similar approaches in other groups in Hellenistic antiquity, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

c) However, within the context of an apocalyptic worldview (which again was a widespread movement also within the Jewish world of Hellenistic antiquity) there was no expectation for a lasting history, but it was expected that the world would come to an end either within this or the next generation. Ethics reflected in the Greek Bible need to be seen in this horizon. Early Christianity was formed

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2  Dhammapada, 26.

3  In Mahāyāna another reading is more common, i.e. that all composites (*saṃskāra*) are impermanent and full of suffering: *anityāḥ sarvasaṃskārāḥ, duḥkhāḥ sarvasaṃskārāḥ, śūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, anātmānāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, śāntaṃ nirvāṇam.* Impermanent are all formations, painful are all formations, empty are all dharmas, impersonal are all dharmas; calm is Nirvāṇa. (Lamotte & Boin 1994, p. 63).

4  https://www.dalailama.com/messages/compassion-and-human-values/compassion

in a situation of urgent crisis awareness. Later, however, Christianity became the state religion of empires and changed its character. Yet, the crisis awareness, criticism of religion and state and the radical urge for reforms came back time and again. And this is the case even today.

d) Both in Buddhism and Christianity we can observe tendencies towards nationalistic state religions and prophetic renewal movements that contribute to change and an awareness of the one humankind. Intellectual and emotional resources for both religions (ideas, stories, emotional identification and rituals) are many. In many ways the structural borders here are not between "Buddhism" and "Christianity", but between these two tendencies within the memories of both traditions.

e) The implication for change on the basis of an awareness of impermanence (in Buddhism generally, in Christianity of any human made institution) is a change of heart or mind (overcoming the *kleśa*, *metanoia*). That means change is possible. The basic conceptual structure for this potential in Buddhism is *pratītyasamutpāda/śūnyatā*; in Christianity it is the concept of love based on the inner-trinitarian dynamism, especially the understanding of the spirit (*pneuma*). In a dialogical perspective it might be interpreted as the experience of the universality of Buddha nature there and the identification with the Cosmic Body of Christ here – there is a fundamental oneness of all reality.

## 2. Areas of concern

### 2.1 Individualism

One of the main areas of concern is the growing individualism on a worldwide scale. In processes of modernization and urbanization old community structures (family, village community, religious parishes, even parties etc.) seem to degenerate in order to give way to individualism which leaves us in disconnected roles in various social fields. However, we need to distinguish the pluralization in societies which changes homogeneous structures into several competing substructures so that not one religion and one way of life are a standard model for people to get orientation but competing options calling for conscious choices. This does not necessarily individualize societies, but to the contrary, new groups and organizations are being formed in the process and religious pluralization can mean a strengthening of groups forming a specific tradition competing with others which may have stronger identity than the classical authoritarian and monolithic structures. Some movements which are subsumed under the terms "fundamentalism", "traditionalism" or "spiritualism" can be interpreted in this framework and thus evaluated in a different light. On the other hand, what seems to be individual choice is not at all based on individual decision making but on fashions, trends and suggestive marketing as we know it very well from the mass media and advertising campaigns especially in the digital world.

Here, the individual is being given the illusion that he/she is making an individual decision, but in reality he/she is subject to massive manipulation. It is an important question to find out whether religions are also subject to these quasi-individualizing trends.

The Buddhist notion of the individual is based on the Buddhist understanding of Self as No-Self or the Selfless. In Buddhism, the notion of an independent Self or I is held to be the root of delusion and of suffering, since it gives rise to distinction and comparison between self and other; and with that to likes and aversions, grasping, lust, greed and anger. The Buddha denied that any Self can be found in the five conditions constituting the human being (*skandhas*), such as material form, feeling, perception, mental constituents and consciousness, since they are subject to impermanence. What is called a Self or I is not an independent entity, but dependent on the law of causality (*karma*) and interdependent arising of things (*pratītyasamutpāda*). While individuality is recognized on a relative level, the notion of an eternal soul (*ātman*) is rejected.

Buddhism has developed in societies which were shaped by Brahmanical value systems (South Asia) or Confucian value systems (East Asia). Both are arranged in hierarchical models. The individual in its rights and duties is subordinated to the group which is defined according to the different cultural patterns. Even though Buddhism with its monastic institutions provided an alternative to traditionally prescribed roles in the social hierarchy, the teaching of No-Self precluded the rise of the kind of individualistic consciousness that developed with the Enlightenment in the West. Today, due to Western influences and changes due to modernization, urbanization and globalization, societies and their behavioural patterns are changing dramatically, though the traditional values may still be upheld as ideals. This causes tension which, however, finds different expression in all Buddhist countries. Whereas in Southeast-Asia Communism destroyed many Buddhist institutions with the exception of Thailand, the life-style of the people has largely remained traditional. The post-communist rebuilding of the Buddhist institutions largely follows the traditional monastic pattern, in which the lay community supports the monks and nuns in order to generate blessings for deceased family members and benefits for this life and future lives. In Cambodia, for example, the Buddhist revival has been spearheaded by villagers, who have been in the forefront of rebuilding temples and ordaining their sons and reclaiming the Khmer Buddhist way of life. Here, like in the other countries affected by communist destruction, the quality and standard of the *saṃgha* remains low due to the loss of an entire generation of learned monks.

In Japan, classical Buddhist institutions have diminished in esteem among the populace ever since the persecutions of the Meiji period, while at the same time continuing to serve the ritual needs of people. On the other hand, modern lay Buddhist movements (Rissho Kosei-kai, Soka Gakkai, Reiyukai) are gaining ground both in Japan and abroad. For example, the Soka Gakkai is now represented in more than 180 countries. With the erosion of the religious authority of the priests and monks, the lay organizations have redefined the spiritual role of the individu-

al in a collective effort. The individual is considered fully capable of performing all religious functions, including merit transfer to deceased ancestors, funerals and ancestral rites. Differently from the traditional institutions, the lay organizations also take care of every aspect of an individual's life, including psychological, spiritual, marital, financial counselling; all members are asked to actively recruit other members, leadership positions are often assumed by women. A point of appeal of the groups is their way of building community through interpersonal communication and rapports in so called dharma circles (*hōza*) of people coming together on a regular basis. In these group counselling sessions, people share the experiences and difficulties encountered in their daily lives and exchange their insights on how the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* illuminates such situations. These personal acts of witnessing help foster the cohesiveness of the group and the allegiance of its members. Since these lay movements are based on the teachings of Nichiren, one of the reformers of the 13th century, their study of Buddhist doctrine is mainly focused on the *Lotus Sūtra* and their practice of chanting the title of the text. Even though more traditional institutions like Zen temples have opened themselves, sometimes reluctantly, to the laity, it is predominantly the lay organizations which provide spaces for adopting modern interests and values to Buddhist ideals.

The crisis of institutional Chinese Buddhism at the beginning of the 20th century was addressed by T'ai-hsu (von Brueck & Lai, 2001, pp. 84ff.), who started his reform movement of "worldly Buddhism" in the 1930's. This reform has strongly shaped the development of Buddhism in Taiwan, where monks and nuns go out from the monastery into the world where they are visibly engaged in social causes together with the laity. Groups such as, for example, the very well-known Tzu-Chi (Compassion Relief) Foundation which was founded by the Buddhist nun Cheng-yen rely on a highly organized form of community volunteerism to accomplish their charitable goals. The backbone of Tzu-Chi and other charitable Buddhist organization are housewives, who have found a new mission in becoming socially involved beyond the confines of the traditionally prescribed roles of wife and mother. The Taiwanese *saṃgha* has the highest percentage of college-educated nuns, who often explain their decision as wanting to be of service to the community, rather than just to the family.

The situation of Buddhism in the West is different from what has been described above. Both in America and Europe Buddhism is well established, both among immigrants from Asian countries and Westerners. While a more traditional form of Buddhism (including regular visits to the temple, observation of Buddhist festivals and rituals) is practiced by the majority of Asian Buddhists, the younger generations are affected by the loss of traditional family traditions and their native languages. This causes feelings of alienation between generations and cultures, as well as a loss of the religious belonging. One of the great challenges that Buddhism shares with other religions is that the family as backbone of handing down tradition does not fulfil this task any more.

Among Western Buddhists, there is a move to create a Western form of Buddhism. Rather than worshiping in temples, Westerners practice predominantly in centres. The relationship between monasticism and laity, teacher and student, the role of women, authority and cultural expressions of individualism in the West remain open issues in this endeavour.

Especially in the West, Buddhism seems to be able to tap into the desire for spirituality – more so than any of the other established religions, since it is able to present itself as a spiritual resource that is not tied to a particular institution, community, dogma or ritual. Buddhist symbols are used to market anything from cosmetics, gardening, food, interior designing, financial planning, just to give a few examples. Buddhist ideas appear in New Age religions, medicine, psychology, sports and business. Carl Bielefeld succinctly describes the situation of Buddhism in the US as follows: "We seem to be dealing not with a religion, but with something that might be called "American secular spirituality" – a longing among many (especially the white middle and upper classes) who are still not satisfied with what they have and who want something more; who have all they can eat but are still searching for that special flavouring, some "psycho-spice" of self-acceptance, perhaps, some rare "inner herb" of guilt-free self-satisfaction. This longing for something more, though in most societies very often associated with religion, seems in our society to be associated with a suspicion of religion. We want something more than institutional religion – something more personal, private, more narrowly focused on "me" and how I feel about myself – what might be called "I-dolatry." (Bielefeld, 2001, p. 2) There is certainly some creativity in this "free-floating spirituality", but the problem is that no real path is visible anymore which is reliable and based on proven experience and authority. Often instead of overcoming the Ego these pseudo-Buddhist teachings and symbols enhance the Ego in its greedy search for self-aggrandisement.

The difference between the understanding of individuality in an Asian, hierarchical, family and community-oriented context, and in the West accounts much for differences in the institutions and practice of Buddhism in those different communities.

Many tendencies described here for Buddhism can be linked to situations defined as Christian as well. There is secularism (in all its different meanings), the search for an individual spirituality and decline of normative institutions due to social segmentation as well as a growing national-religious identity fundamentalism and aggressive identity building against the religious, national and racial other. Situations vary on different continents and under different economic conditions. It is just not possible to speak about "one Christianity" except in a most general and dogmatic-normative sense.

Individualism should be understood as being different than individuality. The development of individuality is necessary for self-responsibility and a basis for any critical attitude towards religious perversions and instrumentalization (power issues, justification of injustice etc.). Individuality is to develop one's own reasoning and overcome judgements just on the basis of authority. This is a Buddhist fundamental principle. It is also a Christian issue since the dignity of humans is grounded

in the concept of the *imago Dei*, which is humans are created in the image of God, empowered and gifted with reason and moral judgement.

Individualism, however, is based on self-aggrandisement and self-centeredness. It is rooted in fear and anguish, the fear of being not seen, of being overlooked and marginalized. The encapsulation of the individual in the last instance is a product of the fear of death. Since fear is also the deep root for aggression and greed, we have to tackle this fear in order to overcome those negative emotions and attitudes which today endanger the survival of the species. Therefore, the root problem might be identified as fear. This is a spiritual question, and both Buddhism and Christianity are to provide mental training (including the cultivation of emotions) in order to educate human beings in a most comprehensive way in this regard.

## 2.2 Secularism and modernity

Secularism and secularization can mean different things in different contexts. Cultures influenced by Buddhism in Asia have not gone through processes comparable to Western secularization after the 18th century. Most of them, however, were "secularized" by different forms of colonialism which altered or destroyed the legitimation of power, changed institutional forms of education and thus altered the processes of tradition. Today, globalization seems to be a new form of "colonialism" in so far as economic factors determine that more and more the whole of life and economic decision making is decreasingly influenced by cultural/religious values and/or political interests and instead by anonymous financial markets. Though the forces of globalization are present everywhere, Asian Buddhism is affected especially in terms of the "capitalization" and Westernization of society and values. This influences the relation of individual and community as much as it did in the 19th century in Europe and the USA.

Technology influences everybody. Whereas in Europe there is a critical tendency to looking at the advancement in technology, in Asia and certain sections of America the myth of progress is still more prevalent. Buddhism hardly relates to the problem of consumerism in modern societies on the basis of its own analysis of egoity, greed and hatred (the three fundamental *kleśas*). Only individual members of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) such as Sulak Sivaraksa or Thich Nhat Hanh raise their critical voices on this issue, whereas most of Buddhist institutions are abstinent in raising their voice, probably on the basis of non-involvement in political and economic affairs. However, it seems that technology and the technologization of all aspects of life, especially information and disinformation technologies, is a problem of mental conditioning which has consequences for basic cultural patterns, and here a function of religion is at stake.

Modernity is unthinkable without mass media which influence not only the individual's life but are at the hub of the very processes of political decision making and cultural image projection. Buddhism, in most cases, presents an excellent media image. It is regarded as peaceful, compassionate, and not corrupt. In international

news, Buddhism is almost never blamed for problems in Asian societies. For example, it is only recently that a connection has been made between state Buddhism and politics of Myanmar (Burma), but what was highlighted instead was the heroism of Nobel Peace Prize awardee Aung San Suu Kyi as an example of one courageous woman who had found in her Buddhist faith a source of empowerment and support to resist the military government. Few analysts implicate some radical Buddhists in Sri Lanka in their violent campaign against the Hindu Tamils. In Thailand, however, corrupt behaviour of monks is exposed in the media, thereby undercutting the credibility of the religion for many. While on the one hand, more transparency would enhance the credibility of religious leaders in Buddhist societies, on the other hand, media focus on scandals has the opposite effect.

## 2.3    Youth and education

The original impulse of Buddhism was an open quest for spiritual knowledge, i.e. training the mind to become free from the fetters of defilements (*kleśa*). Thus, the Buddhist emphasis is on educating the mind to become aware of its own functioning. The investigating spirit of Buddhism meant that nothing should be taken for granted unless it is established by experience and reason. Like other religions, Buddhism sometimes has become dogmatized, and different schools use their established knowledge to satisfy their claims for identity.

To give an example: that everything is impermanent implies that one should not fear change and the dissolution of certain forms of knowledge, institutions etc. Buddhism is highly adaptable, thus today laity and especially women play a greater part than in the past. To see this development not as loss and decay but as a chance and opportunity for a creative development of Buddhism is important. It may be suggested to learn from developments in Europe where the old institutional power of the churches is broken, but a lot of creative religious movements (such as different developments of Buddhism in the West) have come up, and there is a strong conscious and informed quest for religious values and a meaningful life. The other option would be a development of different fundamentalist and exclusive religious movements such as in the USA, which is not desirable because it disturbs communal harmony and finally might threaten world peace.

It is suggested that Buddhist leadership may organize programs to educate people in religion in five steps:

- a training of youngsters in the rituals, life-styles and tenets of their own religious tradition,
- a training in comparative religion in order to realize similarities and differences of tradition, so as to be strengthened in the realization that there is more to life than just material gains and profits,

- a training in dialogical debate based on 1 and 2 in order to find out the best solutions for oneself which are individually tested and verified by dialogical argument,
- a training in awareness of social issues such as poverty, discrimination, exploitation, degradation of environment etc.,
- a training in networking with religious and grass-roots groups and institutions engaged in those issues.

These methods, it seems, would strengthen commitment to one's own resources, which are consciously appreciated, while at the same time recognition of other traditions as meaningful ways to fulfilment and learning cooperation. A basis for this training is of course, the interest and involvement of the young people. It is therefore important to address young people where they are, to be aware of their life situations and problems. This approach is successfully used by some of the lay Buddhist organizations in Japan which have learned much from evangelical movements in Korean Christianity. Buddhist institutions would profit from studies and handbooks on lay leadership training which use the cell group and life-cycle model.

A model of teaching school children both about their own religion as well as those of others has been set by the educational programs of the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan. This model could also be more widely used in other countries.

For Buddhism in the West, educational programs in centres should offer more studies of basic texts of Buddhism in order to address the superficial adaptation of Buddhism to psychological needs as mentioned above. In order to train Buddhist leaders, Buddhist centres should – in cooperation with universities – offer regular, systematic and certified studies in Buddhist history, scripture and meditation which would improve knowledge and competence of Buddhists in all walks of life.

The original impulse in Christianity is to change a human's heart from an attitude of anger and hatred to love until giving up one's self. In this spirit a new aeon would start right now, the Kingdom of God, which is seen as a direct rule of God's spirit in human hearts. Later in Christianity this was expanded and the education of humans was basically a moral education in the Christian values of love and kindness, faith and hope. All this is based on the presence of the Divine Spirit as revealed in Christ, a spirit that was potentially present everywhere.

In Christian countries education has been a basic strategy to bring people to an understanding of creation as well as the redemptive powers active in human history. We cannot go into the details here, but the project of looking into the sky and admiring the works of creation and looking into the human heart and caring for developing the virtues (in Kant's universal sense, of course) can be derived directly from the original Christian impulse.

Today, education in a number of cases has degenerated into a kind of objectified knowledge concerning the laws of physical nature, some statistics of psychological data and normative teaching of how to achieve individual satisfaction. The main religion of today's world is materialism, and technology is used in so many cases for

a more efficient exploitation of nature and man in order to keep economic growth by the increase of production continuing.

To improve the situation is a common issue for Buddhists and Christians, for both have a common concern here. Buddhism is strong in insights into mental training, especially also the training of positive emotions. We know about meditation practices that have proven to be effective in training empathy. Christians also have an experience in the practice of love and care for fellow human beings. An ecological ethics has been developed, but it needs to be implemented. I would suggest that Albert Schweitzer's formula of the veneration for life (*veneratio vitae*) and his cultural philosophy and philanthropic practice derived from it need to be implemented in our educational systems. Buddhists and Christians have a similar motivation to make this happen, and they should use their resources to do so. It is the real education for developing empathy, not just mental awareness about the need for empathy! Similarly, we know that the evolution of all life is based on competition. But this is only half of the story. Competition is complemented by cooperation. In fact, at least in modern human societies without a comprehensive cooperation a decent human life will not be possible in the future. Therefore, we need to realize that competition – as a necessary factor for motivation and improvement of life – is a special strategy within the wider framework of cooperation. Therefore, competition should never try to wipe out the other one but to improve both sides in order to achieve common goals. More awareness and interest need to be given to this dialectics or complementarity, and this is why I think the building of communion on all levels of life is one of the most formidable tasks of humankind today. It is much more than mere dialogue.

## 2.4   Integrity and change of religious tradition

In its deep analysis of reality Buddhism shows that everything is change (*anitya*). Humans, however, want to cling to what they desire and crave for because they expect stability and unchanging security, which is impossible. This gap is experienced as suffering or better: frustration (*duḥkha*). Therefore, to realize that all is impermanent is the first insight of wisdom.

Change, therefore, is nothing unwanted but a proper assessment of how things are. The question of integrity of a religious tradition in Buddhist perspective cannot aim at a changeless repetition of past structures and events. Integrity depends on the essentials that make Buddhism what it is: to present the *dharma* in such a way that it can be grasped as the proper means to overcome ignorance, greed and hatred in order to attain wisdom (*prajñā*) accompanied by compassion (*karuṇā*). Already in early Buddhism the teaching adapted to different conditions: village monks had a different calling than forest monks, laity was differently committed than monks etc. But all kept the precepts and practiced according to their role and place in society. What is appropriate and what not had to be worked out by the community itself and

by councils which took place in order to formulate and present the *dharma* in a most suitable way to the respective conditions.

According to our analysis, there are two basic challenges today: modernization and pluralization. Modernization has to do with the technological age expressed in economization, mobility, urbanization, the factor of mass media etc. The rhythm of life in industrialized societies is very different than in the past. According to experiences all over the globe we are entering into a culture of events which are drummed up and amplified by the media. Those events are connected with persons who are made international stars (such as the Dalai Lama, the Pope), especially at important times (the death of Pope John Paul II.; the death of Lady Diana; the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday), and also with places (holy places of pilgrimage). Both give rise to new touristic pilgrimages which certainly have both religious connotations and touristic value. Religious and secular tourism often cannot be clearly separated, because any centre or place in space and any event in time can become a source of meaning if it is interpreted this way. International film and pop stars are icons for a good life of beauty and health, and this is what people aspire to. Expectations are high, but they will not be satisfied in this realm. Buddhism can point to the beauty of such events without clinging to it, it appreciates all that is but demonstrates how the transitoriness can be related to by a proper awareness.

Pluralization expresses itself in the competition of different life styles, the meetings of religions and hybrid mixtures of formerly distinct traditions. One important response to this situation is the movement of inter-religious dialogue.

Buddhism has engaged in inter-religious dialogue from its beginnings. There are many scriptural sources recording the debates between Buddhist followers and adherents of the different schools of Indian thought. When Buddhism was transmitted to the other cultures of Asia, notably to China, Buddhist concepts needed to be translated into the native language, and translators used already familiar Taoist and Confucian terms for key Buddhist concepts. It was only after a few centuries that Buddhists attempted to draw clearer demarcation lines between their own Buddhist notions and elements of the Taoist and Confucian traditions. Debates between the adherents of these different traditions are addressed in treatises that compare the standpoints of the three religions on particular issues.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Buddhism has continued its spread into different parts of the world; and its deepened encounter with adherents of the three Abrahamic traditions is an important factor in shaping its future direction, especially since many of the teachers now spreading the *dharma* are from a Jewish or Christian background.[5]

For Buddhists, engagement in this more recent form of dialogue has mostly been motivated by three considerations:

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5   A detailed account of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue during the last two centuries in the different part of the world is given by von Brueck & Lai, 2001 (much more detailed in the German and French editions)

- to express goodwill and compassion towards all sentient beings
- to engage communism and materialism on a common platform
- to learn from others about social engagement and the practice of *karuṇā* in modern societies

It is a well-established experience that contemplatives of different religions have an easier time understanding each other than people of their own tradition who are not contemplatives. This shows that a deeper spiritual experience frees the mind from mental limitations and clinging to words and expressions. However, even the contemplative needs to be grounded in a supporting tradition in order to avoid individualism. Buddhism has experiential resources to understand the relation between individual spiritual experience and the grounding in a community of practitioners. And this is especially important today.

In similar ways Christians have had a history of change and adaptation of religious institutions as well as doctrines to the changing modern world. It is the liberation and equality of women and the option for the poor which are the most outstanding issues here. Recently Pope Francis' "*Laudato si*" has extended this concern to the environment in giving an analysis that the present economic system is deadly and not compatible with Christian values at all. In doctrinal terms the Second Vatican Council and the Protestant World Council of Churches have developed a positive attitude toward modern science, especially the theory of evolution and the separation of State and the religious institutions. Thus, pluralism has been more or less accepted to a large extent.

However, social ethics is an issue with political consequences, Europe and America are no longer the centre of the world, but new forms of colonialism have emerged, especially in technology and economy. This requires awareness building and dialogue, which is much more than comparing classical forms of doctrine and understanding of the world.

Dialogue will not lead to a blurring of identities but to a conscious acceptance and reconfiguration of traditionally inherited identities. Dialogue means sharing and mutual participation on all levels of life: in social relations, in emotional encounter and in intellectual debate. The Buddhist model is that of *kalyāṇmitra*, the spiritual friend who is companion on the path. It is important to bring dialogue down from conference culture to grass-root activities. Leaders should educate and encourage their people to take courage in creative ways of sharing with neighbours in faith. They should especially protect these activities from those who accuse dialoguers of syncretism and betrayal of the purity of tradition. Coalitions of dialogue should be built between religions, and leaders should themselves be in the forefront and mediate their concerns publicly.

Examples are the activities of the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Ven. Sheng-yen and Dharma Master Hsin Tao, but also the Pope John Paul II's activities for the peace prayer meeting in Assisi in 1986.

## 3.    Conclusion

The present situation is marked by dramatic changes in all aspects of life, both on the community level and the individual level. Change is something Buddhism takes for granted since anything which is composite is impermanent. Therefore, change needs neither to be welcomed nor condemned. It is the most fundamental fact of life.

Buddhism and Christian communities can flourish under most different circumstances and in the past have adapted to many different situations. They can take any crisis as an opportunity to bring out more clearly its message of training the mind for more clarity and compassion so as to contribute to the peace of mind of sentient beings and finally to overcome all suffering by insight or wisdom and compassion.

Individualism has been diagnosed as one of major factors changing today's societies with great influence on religious traditions. However, it needs to be asked more carefully what individualism really is. Is it a more conscious and self-responsible acceptance of the challenges of one's life? Or is it a way into isolation which makes individual humans depend on dubious influences and unaccountable powers? Has individualism a liberating effect or is it driving people into isolation? Do individuals leave the big religious organizations in order to find individualistic answers to their questions or do they form new and smaller communities which are closer to their psychological and spiritual needs? Is a new form of communion between human beings possible that is not based on coercion and power structures but on a common will of living together and solving actual problems? Such a communion would be more than dialogue; it would be an actual realization of life experience.

Education and new questions and answers to the fundamental problems of human life in communion with other forms of life need to be asked. Religions are accountable for contributing fearless approaches towards the betterment of life on earth, not just for humans only, and not just for those who are insiders of certain religious camps.

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