



**INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR
INTERFAITH EXCHANGES and SHARED
FUTURE for MANKIND**

Dec. 10 – 13, 2019, Beijing Friendship Hotel

SUMMARY REPORT

This international seminar on the theme of *Interfaith Exchanges and Shared Future for Mankind* was sponsored by the China Committee for Religions and Peace (CCRP). The China delegation consisted of 17 members consisting of the following religious profile: Buddhist (2 participants), Catholic (3), Christian (inc. Protestant) (3), Islamic (3), Taoist (2) plus a Professor in International Relations from Fudan University together with the three senior CCRP officials led by Mr Deng. There were 13 overseas participants: Australia (1), Bangladesh (2), Belgium (1), Cambodia (1), Canada (1), Indonesia (1), Korea (Sth) (1), Pakistan (2) and Sri Lanka (1) plus two officials from the Tokyo secretariat of Religions for Peace Asia, also known as the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP).

The seminar was opened by Mr Deng Zongliang, Executive Vice-President of CCRP, who emphasized that the purpose of the seminar was for an exchange of ideas that would promote cooperation and understanding. However, religion should never be politicized as there always needs to be a distinct separation between religion and state. A Vice-President of CCRP, Venerable Yangue, who is also the Executive Vice-President of the Buddhist Association of China and additionally was said to be representing Tibetan Buddhists, in his welcoming comments said that the aspiration of all peoples is for a better future when the global community was facing unprecedented challenges. The seminar was designed to provide a platform of equal learning for the eleven nations represented. In building a community for a shared future, it was critical 'not to talk past each other but to experience joint and fruitful sharing'.

Religion and Ecological Civilization

The first session was led by the leader of the ACRP international delegation and its deputy moderator, Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill of Australia. Its theme was *Religion and Ecological Civilization*. He summarized the various attitudes of the major religions to the environment, including Buddhist, Muslim and Taoist. According to Taoism, 'humanity follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Tao and the Tao follows what is natural'. He drew attention to the statements of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, known as the Green Patriarch, and, more recently Pope Francis with his 2015 letter, *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home*. Patriarch Bartholomew has defined environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility. "The world is indeed our home. Yet it is also the home of everybody, just as it is the home of every animal creature and of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Moreover, it is a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation enjoy its resources". Pope Francis insists the world must 'hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'. He severely criticizes both consumerism with its throw-away culture and irresponsible development because he believes humans no longer see God as the creator of time and space and the universe. Professor Cahill drew on the various recent documents of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and their notion of the green economy.

Venerable Li Guangfu, President of the China Taoist Association spoke about how ecological civilization is fundamentally about people's well-being, and Oriental wisdom can shed some light on the problem, including Taoism which is 'the root of Chinese culture'. Taoist cosmology emphasizes the whole and the oneness of the universe. "We believe in the action of no action for we advocate simple and pure lifestyles'. As an example, he mentioned how in building Taoist temples, the temple is constructed to be in harmony with the surrounding natural environment. Taoist priests are educating their followers about environmental issues, taking them on journeys into the forests and along the rivers. Professor Biman Chandra Barua from the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies at Dhaka University highlighted the all-encompassing nature of the environment. Buddhism emphasizes environmental diversity and balance. The human, the animal and the vegetable are or should be in balance. 'Religion and ecology are very close'.

Dr Philip Kuntjoro Widjaja, Secretary-General of the Indonesian Association of Religions and Culture and a Buddhist, spoke in Chinese. He drew attention to the fact that humans have to take action to achieve the right and precious balance between development and the environment. 'We can help enlighten religious followers, impacting on their hearts. Xi Jinping has emphasized the principle of consultation in reaching shared benefits'. Dr Widjaja gave many practical examples such as households sorting out different types of rubbish, household initiatives not to waste food and companies not to use excessive packaging, people to reduce the use of chemicals such as detergents

and to replace beef with vegetarian food. In particular, he mentioned the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative to encourage re-forestation as Indonesia has one-eighth of the world's rainforests. Venerable Dr Madike Sugathasiri from the Department of Buddhist Studies at the University of Colombo highlighted the significance of the tree. The Buddha was born under a tree, he was enlightened under a tree and he died under a tree. He said, 'Cut not the trees'. He added, 'everyday you gain merit by planting a tree'. Regarding water pollution, the Buddha said, 'you have to practice not to urinate nor defecate nor spit into water'. Dr Sugathasiri made reference to sound pollution, 'the noble silence or the great silence was emphasized by the Buddha'. He finished off with the notion of craving as a central idea of Buddhism and the cause of suffering, and how uncontrolled craving was destroying the environment. 'May the Triple Gem (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha) bless you'.

Mr Ma Zhongping, Secretary-General of the China Islamic Association, spoke of how from the emergence of industrialization we have seen the gradual emergence of ecological degradation. According to the Qur'an, nature is created by Allah the beneficent. In managing and protecting the environment, the Islamic approach emphasized water, water as the source of life. Wasting water is a detestable act. China's Muslim associations were intersecting with Saudi Arabia on these issues. Mr Ma concluded, 'live on the earth as if you were living eternally on this earth. By promoting a green way of development, the skies will be bluer and the grass will be greener'.

Mr Takeshi Kawabata from Religions for Peace Japan who is the Chair of Risho Kosei-kai's Board of Trustees reported that Tokyo's annual average temperature has reportedly risen 3.2 degrees over the past century, pointing to Japan's problems with pollution and environmental degradation. Quoting Re. Nichiko Niwano, he noted "Grass and trees, mountains and rivers, everything has the Buddha nature, and this demonstrates most clearly that all things are precious. Not only humans, but animals, grass and trees are all precious and hold absolute value. All things have the Buddha nature, and are manifestations of Buddhist teachings". The environment is harming itself whereas we need a lifestyle based on 'contentment with few desires'. From the Buddhist vantage point of the truth of impermanence, the Earth as a living planet is always in dynamic flux and we need to live our lives flexibly and resiliently.

He pointed to three key approaches. Firstly, Religions for Peace has implemented the 2014 RfP Asia recommendation for one person to plant a tree by organizing a forestations project for young people about one hour outside Tokyo. The second approach is to decentralize our huge power systems by utilizing energy sources such as wind power, solar power, hydropower and bio-mass to enhance society's self-reliance and diversification. We need to 'visualize energy'. A third approach is to establish 'environmental communities' across north-eastern Asia through trust and cooperation and pass on to our children Earth as a true home.

Cultural Values of Religion

This section of the seminar on the **Cultural Values of Religion** was led off by Ven. Sukomal Barua, President of Religions for Peace Bangladesh, who stated that the earth's boundaries are based on geography as well as colour, religion and prosperity but 'we are one humanity, though many faiths. There is an overwhelming need for true religionists. We here today are living proof of the capacity for unity', adding that religions are the best organized in a civil society. Yet the community of nations was beset by much violence against others. But religious principles are 'an antidote to potential violence'. He added, 'dialogue is ever more important than ever'.

Professor Xu Yihua from Fudan University in China suggested that the relationship between religion and culture is an eternal problem – which comes first? They are interrelated at a deep level. He drew attention to the fact that in the first decades of the People’s Republic of China, the role of religion in China’s social and foreign policy was quite negative but after the opening up in the 1970s, the study of religion was renewed, and among the fruits was a more objective appraisal of the role of Christian clerics in China’s history. Now there is a new approach in China’s public diplomacy with a far greater emphasis on the value of religion. In particular, it is a platform for cross-cultural relations, and he drew attention to the religious studies work of the Catholic theologian, Hans Kung. People-to-people exchanges have become more innovative. In China religion is playing a greater role, and shared humanity is very important in China’s public diplomacy. Interfaith exchanges have not been sufficiently researched. In Professor Xu’s view, the role of religion in intercultural exchanges will become more important.

The President of Religions for Peace Canada, Mrs Pascale Fremont, spoke of the way religion brings value to a culture, especially through the love of God and our striving along the path to perfection. Focus on the person and human dignity has come from the religious view of the centrality of the person. She spoke of the Canadian and Quebec experience, and how Christianity has formed the basis for treating other religions well in recent times e.g. the way immigrants and refugees are welcomed in Canada’s multicultural society. Speaking in Chinese, Dr Maeng Kang-Hyun, Director of the Korean Confucian Rites of Sungkyunkwan, spoke of how religion has irreplaceable value in providing the substance to a social society yet religious culture has become significantly secularized while the relationship between religion and science had become difficult.

Archbishop Ma Yinglin, President of the Bishops’ Conference of Catholic Churches in China, taking an explicitly Catholic perspective, argued that culture is the soul of a nation and religion helps this process. As society changes and a socialist society is being built, religion emphasizes the relationship between personal behaviour and social processes. The year 1921 saw the founding of the Chinese Communist party which led to a great awakening of the authentic Chinese spirit after the colonialist excesses. Religion balances the relationship between tradition and modernization, and a religion like Catholicism must accommodate the social changes; the process of Sinicizing Catholicism must be progressed so as the seeds of the Gospel can bear fruit. This includes the development of a Catholic theology that encompasses Chinese society. One aspect of this is the renovation of Catholic liturgy or mode of worshipping that can adopt and incorporate Chinese elements. Another aspect are charitable projects which Catholicism has always upheld and sponsored as part of its participation in Chinese society. He concluded by drawing attention to the Catholic believers who had helped in the rejuvenation of Chinese society after 1921, and again in the opening up of China in the late 1970s.

Religion and Social Harmony

The last theme for the seminar was **Religion and Social Harmony**. Mr. Mamade Secundar, President of Religions for Peace Belgium and an Ahmadiyyah Muslim, highlighted both the process nature of social harmony for ‘the Lord Almighty is the promoter of harmony’, and the value of religious dialogue. There needed to be a robust concept of the common good, and the increasing of religious literacy ought begin at school. ‘We are hungry for peace and sharing responsibility’. Unfortunately there are fundamentalists in all religions. Rev. Wu Wei, President of the China Christian Council, highlighted the need for meaningful dialogue between peoples and for more interdependent countries. He condemned the rise of hegemonism and exclusivism, and drew attention to mutual learning and peaceful coexistence between the different religions. Muhammad Hanif Khan from the Pakistani chapter of Religions for Peace spoke of how terrorist attacks had brought a bad name to religion. The

question has to be asked: does religion really promote social harmony? Religion binds believers and group belonging is very important.

Dr Nobuhiro Nemoto, Secretary-General of Religions for Peace Asia, introduced the notion of social harms – overcoming them requires a common identity that is critical in social harmony. This led to the notion of the spirit of reciprocal inclusiveness founded on a spirit of understanding which requires humility, openness and respect. Spiritual development must be part of social progress. Venerable Sokpanda of the Supreme Sangha Council of Cambodia spoke of the spiritual crisis in his country after the genocidal actions of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 – 1979 which lasted for 3 years and 28 days. Religion has been very much part of the restoration process such as youth peace camps and through social media. Buddhist philosophy was very much part of the process of national reconciliation. Venerable Puzheng, Deputy Secretary-General of the China Buddhist Association, expanded on this with Buddhism’s idea of harmony for a ‘pure land needs pure hearts’

Chinese Peoples’ Political Consultative Conference

All participants were taken to meet Xia Bao Long, Vice-Chairman and Secretary-General of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) which sits under the Chinese People’s Congress and has been described as an advisory upper house. Xia was previously governor of Zhejiang Province with Xi Jinping as party secretary - the province hosted the G20 Summit in Hangzhou in 2016. The next morning they were taken to meet Zhao Huimin, head of the Beijing CPPCC. In both meetings, the Chinese leaders commented favourably on the results of the Seminar which were explained to them by the leader of the ACRP international delegation and on the work of CCRP under the executive leadership of Deng Zhongliang and the CCRP Secretary-General, Mr Lacan. Formally and informally, the Chinese leaders spoke positively about the 2018 Agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese Government and welcomed a possible visit by Pope Francis.

To conclude this international seminar, international participants visited the Cathedral of Christ the Holy Redeemer, the Xisi Mosque and the Chaoyang Christian Church.

*Compiled by Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill,
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