

Interfaith Dialogue: Christianity Meets Buddhism

On April 30th, 2014 at the Stocker Center at Lorain County Community College auditorium, the Sacred Landmarks Initiative hosted an interfaith dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. The topic of the discussion was how both religions interpreted the concept of "Compassion". The event was moderated by Professor Young Ko, the director of Sacred Landmarks Initiative. The participants were Ven. Shih Ying Fa, the abbot of CloudWater Zendo; and Father Nicholas R.A. Rachford, the pastor of St. Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church.

My own personal religious up-brining was minute, but I was pre-exposed mostly to Catholic practices before. The building was white, with a podium, and a table both speakers were seated at. The auditorium held approximately 175 audience members of varying ages, races, and genders.

Professor Ko briefly introduced both speakers, describing their multiple accomplishments and works in their religions. Ven. Shih Ying Fa was the first to speak. He was dressed in black and red robes, with a golden pin. His head was shaved, and he wore glasses and sandals. The importance of the red sash is that in times past, students would bare a shoulder, and circle their teachers three times with the bare shoulder facing them. This action demonstrated that the student would "shoulder a burden" for the teacher. However, colder climates made exposed shoulders impractical, and the red sash indicates the same thing as a bare shoulder. Ven. Shih Yi Fa has practiced Pure Land Mahayana Buddhism for 29 years. He prefaced his speech by ringing a bell three times and chanting.

He described that Siddhartha Gautama, otherwise known as Buddha, created the Four Noble Truths, which describe life's suffering, and how to transcend it. Buddha also created the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which combined knowledge, intention, and meditation to create thoughts that bring peace. There are also the three Poisons that create suffering, which are Delusion, Cravings, and Ill Will. Non-Attachment, Love and Kindness, and enlightenment are the counters to the three poisons, which will allow one to transcend the suffering experienced in a life. The concept of interdependence is key to the Buddhist ideal of compassion. The thoughts and feelings you have, affects more than just yourself because everything is connected and by following the Noble Eight-Fold Path you can help others transcend suffering by being compassionate. He recited more verses.

Compassion in Buddhism comes from a sense of selflessness. In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion is encouraged to liberate all living things from suffering. Helping everyone become enlightened, even by delaying your own entrance to Nirvana is an act of Buddhist compassion. The ideal being in Mahayana Buddhism is the Bodhisattva, who is one such person delaying their entrance to Nirvana in order to help others. Buddhist monks take vows, and memorize sutras such as the Heart Sutra, to remind them to help others and end suffering. They show compassion to animate and inanimate objects, because life is in all things. The Pure Land in Pure Land Buddhism is a clean, calm mind. Ven. Shih Ying Fa concluded his speech by having the audience take meditative, relaxing breaths while he recited Four Noble Vows.

Father Rachford took the podium second to discuss the meaning of compassion in Christianity. He briefly discussed Christianity's history, how the kings of Israel and Judah led to class distinctions.

Kingdoms led to corruption, and the Prophets of the Bible were displeased with it. He detailed how Jesus studied, preached, and practiced the idea of compassion. Compassion in Christianity means to suffer with to others. It has roots with the Latin word for "Suffering with nearness to others". In Christianity, compassion strengthens bonds between people and equalizes individuals. It is what drove Jesus' actions. Christ is God's link to human is suffering, which is what makes Jesus the savior he exhibits compassion and caring. Unity is compassion.

After both speakers had presented their speeches, Professor Ko discussed finer details of both Christianity and Buddhism. This was followed by a Question and Answer session. From this session, the audience was told that hospitals were the result of Christian compassion. A goal of Buddhism is to "live simply so that others may simply live". Ven. Shih Ying Fa also discussed the difference between "non-attachment" and "detachment", stating that detachment is the lack of caring or love, where as non-attachment is loving and appreciating, without over-valuing. Both religious men admit that in today's capitalist society it is hard to be compassionate because people focus too much on what they want to be compassionate.