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Beyond Christian Ecumenism: Joseph Ratzinger's Thought on Religious Pluralism and the Experience of the Asian Bishops

Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren
Chinese University of Hong Kong

In an article that appeared earlier this year in *The Ecumenist*, I argued that Joseph Ratzinger's view of ecumenism has been influenced by his critical attitude toward pluralism and relativism. While the situation in Europe calls for a more intellectual approach towards ecumenism in the face of aggressive secularism, the realities in Asia necessitate a more practical approach on a continent where Christians are a minority living among adherents of other ancient faiths. Furthermore, most Asian countries are poor and it is particularly urgent that ecumenical efforts be focused on the welfare of the people. This means that ecumenical efforts must reach down from the heights of abstraction to uplift the poor, the underprivileged, and the marginalized.[1]

To elaborate further on ecumenism from an Asian perspective, this article seeks to examine the extent to which the teachings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)[2] differ from and converge with Joseph Ratzinger's position on religious pluralism. The ecumenical efforts of the FABC have moved beyond the confines of working with members of other Christian churches and are directed towards cooperating with adherents of other religious traditions in Asia to realize the Kingdom of God on earth as preached by Jesus Christ. However, as I will demonstrate, Ratzinger fears that this work with other religions might undermine Christian uniqueness and the role of Jesus Christ as universal saviour of the world. This fear has often created antagonism between Ratzinger and Asian theologians. My purpose in this article is to show where some of this fear originates so that we can find ways to overcome it and work together, in dialogue with Asian bishops and in solidarity with the poor, to address the pressing issues of our times.

Privileging Western Thought

Joseph Ratzinger thinks that the more positive interpretation of world religions, which has been suggested in recent times, lacks biblical foundation. Therefore the prevailing optimism about the salvific values of

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non-Christian religions is "simply irreconcilable with the biblical assessment of these religions."[3] Assuming the norm of Western philosophical and theological thought, he believes that Greek intellectual and cultural expression found in Christianity is part of God's plan. In other words, the relation between faith and reason cast in Hellenistic philosophy is part of biblical inspiration and thus is part of faith itself. Acknowledging that the implantation of the gospel has not been fruitful, Ratzinger also admits that to be Christian means "conversion to Europeanism" and thus Christianity remains a minority religion in Asia. Consequently, there is no authentic Asian version of Christianity that reflects a profound understanding of the Oriental culture and spirit.[4]

While it is understandable that Ratzinger, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), would take strong measures against those who attempt to undermine Christian uniqueness, his critics think that he tends to give "an exaggerated caricature" of religious pluralism and Asian religions, among other things.[5] Critical of Western theologians influenced by the Enlightenment, Ratzinger concludes that in granting equality to all religions, they denied all public truth to any of them. His conclusion may be justified; the problem is that Ratzinger tends to view theologians operating from a non-Western paradigm in the same light. He seems to regard them all as products of post-Enlightenment thinking.

Instead of seeing religious pluralism as a manifestation of the abundance and gift of God, Ratzinger perceives it as a problem and a challenge for the Church to proclaim the uniqueness and saving universality of Christ. In other words, his perception of non-Christian religions as valid paths of salvation is essentially pessimistic and negative. Influenced by the early Church fathers' teaching on the *Logos*, Ratzinger believes that there may be revelation in these religious traditions, but not salvation.[6] The teaching of Asian bishops, however, provides a different viewpoint regarding non-Christian religions.

The Spirit Blows Where It Wills

The FABC recognizes the significant and positive elements in other religious traditions, especially their profound spiritual and ethical values. Asian bishops have asserted that over the centuries, traditional non-Christian religions have been a source of strength and light for their communities. These religions have been the authentic expression of the deepest spiritual longings of the heart and have played an important role in the histories and cultures of Asian societies. Like Ratzinger, the Asian bishops do not subscribe to a multiplicity of divine mediations that consider all religions as equally valid. They are convinced that "the Spirit is leading them not to some nebulous syncretism but to an organic integration of all that is good, true and beautiful in the traditions and cultures of their nations, into the vast treasures of the Christian heritage."[7]

The FABC has acknowledged the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning the presence of the Spirit beyond the confines of the visible Church. It admits that the same Spirit who has been active in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church was also active among the peoples of Asia before the incarnation of Christ, and is still active among them. The understanding of the Spirit as the author of plurality fits well with the experience of the Asian churches. This experience of the Spirit as the agent of diversity and plurality enables us to overcome the temptation towards uniformity or "steamrolling all differences and forcing them into pre-conceived moulds and standardized pattern."[8] At the same time, the Spirit of God also guides all nations, cultures, and languages towards wholeness and harmony.

More importantly for our study of religious pluralism is the fact that the FABC recognizes the presence of the Spirit in other religions in Asia, in the faith of the people, in their sacred texts, in their respective creeds and cults, in their prayer and communion, and in their ever-growing commitment to religious truth. Above all, it is the moral and religious values enshrined in Asian religions that allow us to discover the presence of God through the Spirit. In concrete terms, we discover in them the "fruits of the Spirit," such as goodwill, generosity, openness, compassion and a profound sense of God's presence in all things (Gal. 5:22-23). A clear sign of the presence of the Spirit in the living faiths of Asia is the living out of the moral code and the common concern to work for the alleviation of hunger and poverty and for the promotion of justice and peace.[9]

Receptive Pluralism

The great religions of Asia with their respective traditions reveal to us the diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples. In the context of God's saving action in the Spirit, it follows that "every religion is a historically and cultural conditioned response to the action of the Spirit, and therefore limited

and partial."[10] This means religions must relate and hold dialogue with one another in order to have a better grasp of the truth. Regarding this, the Asian bishops have asserted that all the religions have an intrinsically "relative" character to the extent that they are open to a meaningful communication with other religions. Thus the FABC proposes a model of the theology of religions called *receptive pluralism*: "The presence of the Holy Spirit in and beyond the church in Asia may be perceived in a variety of ways. This is due, in part, to the fact that people encounter the Spirit in their context, which is pluralistic in terms of religions, culture and worldviews. In this light, we affirm a stance of *receptive pluralism*."[11]

The FABC acknowledges that no religious experience of any community is complete by itself, and each experience must be open to the faith experience of others. Therefore the FABC affirms receptive pluralism as a way to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This means there is a reciprocal complementarity between the various religions, coherent with the plurality and unity of God's saving plan. This idea suits the Asian psyche well with its stress on harmony to cope with the tension between unity and diversity.[12] Thus beyond the extremes of exclusivism and inclusivism, the FABC proposes a pluralism that resonates well with the constitutive plurality of reality in the Asian continent.

The FABC believes inclusivism does not respect the identity of each religion and exclusivism does not recognize the relationship between the religions. Receptive pluralism does not mean a levelling of all faiths, because to say all religions are equal is simplistic and would not promote sincere dialogue. Another important point is that complementarity among religions is not affirmed with regard to the Absolute, but only to the historically and culturally conditioned ways in which people experience the sense of the divine.[13]

Receptive pluralism is an effort by the FABC to express a theology of religion rooted in the Asian reality. In such a vision, nothing is absolute by itself, but each is related to the other, even to its opposite, like *yin-yang*.[14] Though differences in religions exist, they are not irreconcilable and have their true value in the profound inter-relation and harmony that unites all aspects of reality.[15] Wary of the danger of dubious syncretism, the FABC stresses an integration that is profound and organic in character. It teaches that the religions of Asia have a crucial role to play in God's economy of salvation by promoting peace, communion, and more humane ways of living for all peoples in Asia. Asian bishops believe the religious traditions of Asia have been endowed with "creative and redemptive forces" that can transform the world according to God's salvific will.[16]

> Regarding the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, Ratzinger writes:
>
> Christianity stands at one and the same time in both a positive and a negative relation to the religions of the world: it recognizes itself as being linked with them in the unity of the concept of a covenant relationship and lives out of the conviction that the cosmos and its myth, just like history and its mystery, speak of God and can lead men to God; but it is equally aware of a decided No to other religions and sees in them a means by which man seeks to shield himself from God instead of leaving himself open to his demands.[17]

It is obvious Ratzinger favours the Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—which are related to each other through one ancestral covenant.

Pluralism versus Relativism

Relativism holds that there are many versions of truth that vary according to the different subjects who hold different views of reality. It is obvious that a pluralism that claims all points of view of reality as being of equal value ends up in relativism. Asian theologians agree that such relativism actually destroys the rich meaning of pluralism.[18] However, the FABC teaches that pluralism need not always involve a radical subjectivism and relativism in the sense of claiming that all points of view are valid. At the same time, the Asian bishops are aware that the pluralistic, democratic, and modern societies have resulted in the development of excessive individualism and subjectivism and a consequential relativizing of reality.[19] Asian bishops thus reject a relativism claiming that all points of view of reality are equal.

The affirmation of pluralism by the FABC rests on the human search for an underlying unity that enables us to understand apparent plurality better. Asian philosophies and theologies have focused on the unity and harmony behind pluralism.[20] In tandem, both Ratzinger and the Asian bishops favour unity and harmony in our pluralistic societies. However, Ratzinger, as a critic of the Enlightenment, fears that religious pluralism could lead to the relativism that seeks to level all the differences between the various religions, while Asian bishops, on the other hand, because of their experience in this continent in which many ancient religions flourished and

gave meaning to the lives of millions, affirm pluralism as the gift of God. Ratzinger's concern may be relevant in Europe due to the influence of post-Enlightenment. However, Christianity has flourished in Asia without the influence of this liberal atmosphere.

Co-builders of the Kingdom

The theology of receptive pluralism suggested by the FABC means the Asian bishops look upon non-Christians not only as fellow pilgrims on the road to the Kingdom of God, but also as co-builders of that same kingdom in history. Hence the ancient religious traditions in Asia are active partners in the realization of God's plan of salvation. This in effect calls upon the Church to abandon its ghetto mentality. Receptive pluralism does not view the Church as the only means to realize the Kingdom of God, and so calls upon other religions to join forces to build a better world, making the Reign of God a concrete reality in Asia.[21] The Kingdom of God is a gift entrusted to all humanity, and thus every religion, every people, and every culture must be responsible for it. This means the Church has no monopoly on the Kingdom but is a co-partner with members of other religions to realize it on earth.

From the start, the FABC documents described the pilgrimage towards the Kingdom as a journey that involves all humankind, with particular focus on Asia, its peoples, and the pluralism that characterizes them. This pilgrimage is thus an inter-religious project.[22] The Asian bishops point out that God's reign has a communitarian and social dimension because the Kingdom of God is about "relationship" and "the Christian travels not alone, but in community."[23] Diversity and plurality in Asian multicultural and religious societies are not opposed to the building of the Kingdom of God, but are actually necessary for its realization.

The FABC is keenly aware that the struggle for human liberation is not confined to the Christian community alone, much less to the Church. The bishops acknowledge the many great religious traditions in Asia that form the basis of the establishment and growth of cultures and nations in this vast continent. In solidarity with them, they seek the flourishing of the human person and the transformation of Asia.[24] Thus it becomes clear the FABC adopts an open attitude towards other religions in its understanding of the Reign of God as a universal reality, extending beyond the confines of the Church. The Kingdom of God unites us all, deeper than differences in specific beliefs.

The Kingdom of God and the Church

Ratzinger admits that the Church can learn from the historically evolving currents of theology. He writes: "Every new situation of humanity also opens new sides of the human spirit and new points of access to reality. Thus, in her encounter with the historical experience of humanity, the Church can be led ever more deeply into the truth and perceive new dimensions of it that could not have been understood without these experiences."[25] But Ratzinger is not open to the idea that other religions can be co-builders of the Kingdom of God. Critical of radicalized political theologians, he is afraid such interpretation implies that "the Kingdom of God becomes the product of the human act of liberation."[26]

Ratzinger's ecclesiology maintains that the Kingdom of God is identified in the person of Jesus Christ and was realized in his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus did not merely proclaim the Kingdom of God—he *is* the Kingdom of God.[27] The invitation to believe in this Good News, the "gospel," implies believing in Jesus Christ. Since Jesus also founded the Church to continue his work of redemption, Ratzinger argues, the Church thus becomes the visible realization of the Kingdom. This means that proclaiming the Church and implanting the Church is the means of building the Kingdom of God on earth. Critical of the focus on the "kingdom" or "regnocentricity" towards which all religions must move, Ratzinger thinks that this is close to relativism that deprives religion of its message and identity.[28]

Ratzinger also has the fear that such regnocentric theology will weaken the Church's missionary impulse because it implies that people can reach the divine through their own religious traditions, without the need to convert to Christianity.[29] Critical of those who separate the Kingdom of God from the Church, Ratzinger insists it was Jesus who proclaimed the Kingdom of God, a proclamation that gave birth to the Church. However, in the Asian context, with its plurality of religions and cultures, and massive poverty, some believe it is more appropriate to stress the Reign of God rather than the Church, since the Church is foreign to most people.

Church of the Poor

Related to the theology of the Kingdom is the ecclesiology of the FABC, which characterizes the Church as the "Church of the Poor" and the "Servant Church." The Asian bishops insist that if the Church wants to become part of the life of the continent, it should take sides with the multitudes of Asian poor. The Church cannot isolate

itself as an affluent institution surrounded by people who lack the basic necessities of life. It should bear witness to evangelical simplicity and reach out to the poor. The Church should also speak out for the rights of the disadvantaged and the powerless against all forms of injustice. The FABC teaches that we cannot compromise ourselves by consorting with the rich and powerful in our respective countries.[30]

Not only must the Church in Asia be the Church *of the* poor, it must also be *with* the poor, sharing their lives, aspirations, and struggles, to the extent of becoming a "poor Church." One document of the FABC calls for this realization to be a poor Church through "inculturation," in which the local church lives in solidarity with the poor and their traditions, customs, and ways of life.[31] It calls upon the local church to conform to the pattern of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh so that it can effectively bring the living Christ to Asia.[32] Just as Christ wished to be identified and to be served in the naked, hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned, the Church in Asia must also witness to Christ in its commitment to the poor.

This idea of being the Church of the poor and the Church with the poor also means getting rid of an ecclesiocentric attitude that puts institutional interests above the needs of people. An Asian Church that is more interested in the preservation of its structures, schools, hospitals, and bureaucracy than in serving the poor cannot be a credible witness to the gospel.[33] Thus Asian bishops have come to realize that the Church has projected images that are counter-witnesses to the values of the gospel. Now is the time to renew the Church, so that it is a true servant in the cause of justice and peace.

A servant Church has no fear of becoming a minority, for it is a pilgrim Church on the way to the Kingdom. As a faith community, the Church is not centred on itself, but on Christ. The servant Church, in its teachings, clearly makes a distinction between the gospel and its own doctrinal understanding of the gospel. In its daily existence, the Church puts doing the truth before the formulation of doctrine, reflecting the values of the Kingdom rather than those of the rich and powerful. There is no dichotomy between public role and personal faith, no social segregation between the ordained hierarchy and the laity.[34]

Ecclesiology of Communion

The understanding of the local church embraced by Asian bishops suggests an "ecclesiology from below" in contrast to Ratzinger's "ecclesiology from above." Ratzinger insists that the Church is not a human construct but a sacramental gift of God. Suspicious of the image of Church as "Church of the poor" and "servant Church" as smacking of Marxist influence, his preference is for an ecclesiology of communion that avoids dividing the Church into rich and poor. Fearful that expressions like "People of God" and "Church of the poor" might turn into political slogans, Ratzinger emphasizes the vertical dimension of ecclesiology. He is critical of those who reduce the ecclesiology of communion to a preoccupation with the relations between the local churches and the universal Church.

The primary focus of the Asian bishops in their task of evangelization is the building of a truly local church. But Ratzinger cautions against the horizontal idea of communion, with its focus on self-determination and autonomy that he believes is dominating the Church. While he recognizes the need to correct the excesses of Roman centralization, he insists on the ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church over the particular churches. Ratzinger regards local churches in different places as distinctive expressions of the universal Church of Christ. This means we cannot fashion or construct a church according to our own ideas, because the local church has its ecclesiality in and from the universal Church. Ultimately, he argues that the relationship between the universal Church and particular churches is a mystery, so we cannot compare the Church to any human organization.

As a high-ranking prelate with enormous responsibilities towards the entire Church, it is natural for Ratzinger to emphasize the universality of the Church. Asian bishops, however, need to establish local churches involved in the struggles of the people in cooperation with other members of their communities. In the vision of the FABC, the Church in the pluralistic context of Asia should acknowledge that the Reign of God is at work in the socio-political, cultural, and religious situations in Asia, and should enter into dialogue with them.[35] This is due to the fact that the Church is not the only instrument of the Kingdom, but serves and promotes the Kingdom together with other members of the Reign as well. The Church must help to realize the values of the Kingdom so that these values can be inscribed deeply into the fabric of Asian societies. Conscious that it does not have a monopoly on the Spirit of Christ, for the Spirit blows where it wills, the Church must collaborate with other religious communities for the sake of human development and eventually the salvation of all.

A Participative Church

Asian bishops hope the Church would be a "catalyst" for justice and peace together with other Christians, members of other religions, and all people of goodwill, to make the Kingdom of God a reality in Asia. This involves facilitating dialogue between different socio-political forces, religions, and cultures.[36] Inter-religious dialogue should lead to a better articulation and expression of the liberating and unifying force of each religion, and be conducted for the realization of justice and peace. To perform this task well, the Church should undergo a profound transformation to become a "truly participative Church" that works with other believers and with other believing communities for a communion of all life.[37] This also calls for a creation of a new style of leadership, a leadership that facilitates real leaders and not mere followers. As such, the laity must be empowered to have an active role in the Church. The marginalized and the poor also must be heard in the Church.[38]

The call for a participative Church worries Ratzinger because he thinks it promotes a kind of Marxist interpretation of the Bible, with its emphasis on equality: the Kingdom of God now becomes no more than a classless society. The Church envisioned by the Asian bishops might seem to Ratzinger like the establishment of a popular church at the service of the Kingdom of God, siding with the poor against the rich and powerful. Ratzinger regards this kind of reading of scripture and signs of the times not as theology, but as ideology arising in a specific time and place. The reform of the Church that Ratzinger approves is not structural changes, but a renewal of faith in each individual that involves a personal admission of sin. What the Church needs, he believes, are not managers, but martyrs. Reform of the Church implies the conversion of sinners and not the transformation of churches.[39]

Ratzinger's view of the Church-world relationship is dualistic and Manichean in outlook. This pessimistic outlook of the world, conditioned by his reading of Augustine and Bonaventure, results in his preference for an authoritarian, hierarchical model of leadership in the Church, which he believes would lead our societies back to God. In contrast to this traditional Western dualistic view of the Church versus the world, in the East we have an organic approach to reality. According to the FABC, "wherein the whole, the unity, is the sum-total of the web of relationships, and interaction of the various parts with each other … The parts are understood in terms of their mutual dependence."[40] Some prefer the term "organic pluralism" to "receptive pluralism" because it implies diversity as well as the acceptance of opposition.

Open Inclusivism

It is important to emphasize that in spite of his negative attitude towards religious pluralism and his insistence on the superiority of the Catholic faith, Ratzinger is not blind to truths found in other religious traditions. In fact, he has supported an inclusivist position that does not lead to the absorption of one religion by another or to syncretism. It is an inclusivism that implies the transformation of a pluralism, where all religions are deemed to be equally valid, to a plurality, where different religions co-exist together in harmony, each striving towards the truth. Ratzinger recognizes that we must look for what is positive in other religious traditions that also contain the precious pearl of wisdom. At the same time, he admits that religions can be perverted and destructive. Ratzinger warns that Christians can succumb to sickness and become superstitious, and thus, personal faith must always be purified on the basis of truth. Continuing, he said, "truth, which shows itself, on the one hand, in faith and, on the other hand, reveals itself anew through dialogue, allowing us to acknowledge its mystery and infinity."[41] This constant search for the truth lies at the heart of Ratzinger's theology.

The relentless quest for the truth leads Ratzinger to adopt an open inclusivism that acknowledges that there are truths that Christianity can discover in other religious traditions. Critical of the tired faith of Europe, he admits that the religious commitment of non-Christians puts Christians to shame. These non-Christians have something to offer to Christians and thus it was wrong to destroy the religious culture of the people, as the early missionaries sought to do. This has great implications for our understanding of mission, especially when Asian churches face immense challenges in proclaiming the gospel on a continent that is the most populous and pluralistic, and the least Christian, in the world. Asian churches need to establish a new relationship with the great religions and traditions existing in that continent. In fact, Ratzinger recognizes that we must undertake our mission with greater sensitivity to the cultural traditions of the people. In this way Christians, non-Christians, and even people with no religious beliefs can proceed together to search for the common truth that unites us all.

Conclusion

Joseph Ratzinger has generally been resistant to many of the new theological ideas coming from Asia. But his

willingness to move the tradition forward based on solid scholarship—even when it goes against accepted former norms—makes him an important figure to understand. Where he has set up barriers, particularly in areas that directly affect issues important to the Asian churches, it is important to determine his reasoning in each case. Now that he is Pope Benedict XVI, it is even more critical that Catholic theologians seek to understand where the open and closed doors are. Asian theologians can work better in collaboration with Western theologians to deepen our insights. There are Asian insights with arguments that are consistent with Ratzinger's own theological program. We need to transform what has been largely an antagonistic relationship between Asian bishops and the Vatican into a productive dialogue through an understanding of where the theological fault lines are drawn for this bastion of Western theology.

Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren, OP, is a research student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

1 See Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren, "Logos versus Ethos: A Critical Examination of Joseph's Ratzinger's Understanding of Ecumenism," *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture and Society,* 49:1 (Winter 2012), 1–8.

2 The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has members from the following countries: Bangladesh, India (CBCI, Syro-Malabar; Syro-Malankara & Latin Rite), Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. It also has associate members from Baucau, East Timor, Dili, East Timor, Hong Kong, Irkutsk, Siberia, Macau, Maliana, East Timor, Mongolia, Nepal, Novosibirsk, Siberia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

3 Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 246.

4 Ibid., 246–47.

5 Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, ed., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 174.

6 *Dominus Iesus*, published by the CDF under the direction of Joseph Ratzinger, states: "If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation" (no. 22).

7 Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 46.

8 Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997–2001, Volume 3* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002), 321.

9 Miguel Marcelo Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), 41.

10 Ibid., 42.

11 Rosales and Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 261.

12 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 3*, 127.

13 Marcelo Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes*, 44.

14 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 3,* 257 and 321.

15 Miguel Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes*, 45.

16 Ibid., 46.

17 Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 21.

18 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 3,* 333.

19 Ibid., 334.

20 Ibid.

21 Rosales and Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 261. See also Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes*, 50.

22 Ibid., 304

23 Ibid., 184.

24 Ibid., 179. C.S. Song argues that the Church has no mission other than the mission of God's reign. The Church must relate to the world and that relation must be shaped by the relation of God's reign to the world. C.S. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993), 8.

25 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 20.

26 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 77.

27 Ibid.

28 Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 73.

29 Ibid.

30 Rosales and Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 5–6.

31 Marcelo Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes*, 121.

32 Rosales and Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 95.

33 Ibid., 146.

34 Ibid., 340.

35 Ibid., 344.

36 Ibid.,

37 Quatra, *At the Sides of the Multitudes*, 169. See also Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 3*, 324.

38 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 3*, 158.

39 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 53.

40 Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992–1996, Volume 2* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 276–77.

41 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 111.

Engaged Buddhism: Personal Practice and Worldly Transformation

Patricia Q. Campbell
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario

"In many cases what differentiates engaged Buddhism is solely its insistence upon the necessity of taking practical action in the world." Sallie B. King

Taking the example of the Order of Interbeing, a well-known, international engaged Buddhist organization founded by Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, and activist Thich Nhat Hanh, this paper explores Engaged Buddhism from the perspective of practice, both that which is actively socially or politically engaged and that which is enacted by individuals for personal transformation. While traditional meditative practices are often regarded as passive, detached from the outside world, and focused only on the individual, I argue that they involve key ritual elements that have the potential to tie personal practice to real change in the world. The Order of Interbeing emphasizes both styles of practice, reflecting Nhat Hanh's deep recognition of the need for spirituality and the support of a strong spiritual community for creating effective, life-long, ethically grounded activists.

The movement known as Engaged Buddhism is now widely acknowledged as a contemporary form of Buddhism that had its start in the 20th century. It arose in various places around the globe, primarily in response to a number of humanitarian crises in East and South Asia.[1] A broad movement involving numerous Buddhist sects, Engaged Buddhism applies Buddhist ethics and practices to real-world problems. For much of the 20th century, engaged Buddhists around the globe have participated in social, political, and environmental activism with the aim of changing the world for the better.

While engaged Buddhists employ traditional Buddhist ethics, the movement itself is often described as representing a shift from an older contemplative, renunciatory, and philosophical style towards a more this-worldly focus. Christopher Queen, editor of two volumes on engaged Buddhist movements, defines engaged Buddhist groups, which he calls "Buddhist liberation movements," as "voluntary groups and non-governmental organizations committed to realizing a just and peaceful society by Buddhist means."[2]

One of the most commonly noted characteristics of Engaged Buddhism is its change of perspective regarding Buddhist soteriology. Queen notes that personal, other-worldly liberation has given way to an emphasis on social justice or this-worldly liberation.[3] In his introduction to *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, he cites arguments that the Buddha himself was not a reformer, since the early *sangha* (monastic community) represented a departure from society rather than social reform. Queen also points out that many Buddhist movements in South and East Asia were historically supported by the state, and thus participated in a number of oppressive regimes; some even supported the military efforts of their political.[4] Queen thus concludes that Engaged Buddhism, as a broad socially and politically active liberation movement, is a new expression of Buddhism in the world. He labels it a "fourth *yana*," or vehicle, in the history of Buddhism: the *Navayana* or "new vehicle."[5]

Others have emphasized the consistencies between traditional forms of Buddhism and engaged Buddhist movements. Sallie B. King, who was co-editor with Queen on their 1996 volume on Engaged Buddhism, recently argued that several key elements of Engaged Buddhism are all supported by ethical principles found in early Buddhist scripture.[6] King thus concludes that Engaged Buddhism is "continuous with tradition, not a radical break from tradition."[7] Still, she notes that the distinct quality of Engaged Buddhism is its emphasis on "the necessity of taking practical action in the world."[8]

Given Queen's and King's arguments, it would seem that the key differences between more traditional expressions of Buddhism and the engaged Buddhist movement lie in an emphasis not only on society (as opposed to the individual) and worldly issues (as opposed to otherworldly salvation), but also on practice. The engaged Buddhist is an activist, one who steps out of the temple and into the social and political arena to actively work for positive change. This is Buddhism "off the cushion," as it were.

While this style of Buddhist activism has always been the foundation of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of

Interbeing, the organization has gradually shifted its primary activities towards individualized practices such as retreats, meditation, breathing exercises, and training in mindfulness. Rather than representing a departure from its engaged Buddhist roots, Nhat Hanh believes that these individualized spiritual practices do in fact constitute "engaged" Buddhism.

Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing

Thich Nhat Hanh, in fact, is credited with coining the term "Engaged Buddhism." During the war in Vietnam, he and numerous associates, both monastic and lay, worked tirelessly to aid local people caught up in the hostilities.[9] Explaining their decision to act, Nhat Hanh wrote: "when a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his unbombed temple? If he has wisdom and compassion, he will find ways to practice Buddhism while helping other people."[10] Nhat Hanh and his associates founded a number of Engaged Buddhist organizations during the war. One such organization was the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), founded in 1964. Its purpose was to train young social workers to assist the poor in remote Vietnamese villages.[11] Associated with Van Hanh University, the SYSS became an influential vehicle for Engaged Buddhism during the war.[12]

The Order of Interbeing (*Tiep Hien* in Vietnamese) had its beginnings in 1965, when Nhat Hanh and a few of his close associates set out their objectives and principles for their activism during the war. Tiep Hien was created to focus on the contemporary conditions of the world, and the practical application of compassion and understanding in this world rather than a future Buddhaland. Nhat Hanh writes: "The word *tiep* means 'being in touch with' and 'continuing.' *Hien* means 'realizing' and 'making it here and now.'"[13] Strongly focused on Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness, one of the group's guiding principles was a refusal to ally itself with either of the opposing sides of the conflict. In 1967, Nhat Hanh wrote: "In reality the war in Vietnam cannot be ended by the people who support either side. By doing so what they really do is to help the war continue and to help destroy the Vietnamese people."[14] In February 1966, Nhat Hanh initiated the first six members into his new order, three laymen and three laywomen.

Nhat Hanh's organizations performed a wide range of social services during the war, including helping victims of a devastating flood in an isolated province on the Thu Bôn River and sheltering 11,000 people on the campus of Van Hanh University near Saigon while the area was under attack.[15] They aided and protected deserters, evacuated villagers from the line of fire, reconstructed villages, raised money for war orphans, and educated rural people in agriculture, medicine, and sanitation. In order to get their message out and inspire people to join their activities, they disseminated various works from writers, poets, and artists. Some members fasted in protest of government policies persecuting Buddhists; some lay members shaved their heads in solidarity with monks and nuns.[16] Two individuals who had been associated with the SYSS, Thich Quang Duc and Nhat Chi Mai, immolated themselves for peace.

Exile in France

In 1966, Nhat Hanh went on a speaking tour in the United States in order to raise international awareness of the suffering of his people. During the tour, he met Martin Luther King, who was profoundly influenced by Nhat Hanh's ideas of peace. King nominated Nhat Hanh for the 1967 Nobel Peace prize. The tour was very successful in disseminating Nhat Hanh's message, but it ended on a sad note for Nhat Hanh personally. Fearing an attempt on his life, his friends in Vietnam warned him not to return home.[17] He has lived in exile in France since that time.

Nhat Hanh's associate, and one of the original six members of the Tiep Hien order, Sister Chân Không, joined him in France in December 1968. Together they worked to raise money for the people of their homeland, and to raise awareness of their plight. From sponsoring orphans and poor families in Vietnam to assisting the thousands of "boat people" fleeing the country in the 1970s, Nhat Hanh, Chân Không, and their colleagues continued to work to aid the Vietnamese people.

In the early 1970s, Nhat Hanh began several years of retreat in the south of France. He and the Tiep Hien members who accompanied him greatly reduced their public activities, although they continued to work to aid Vietnamese people fleeing the country after the war.[18] King writes that "Nhat Hanh emerged from this period of relative retreat from public life with his energies devoted to the people both of Vietnam and the West."[19] In 1982, the Plum Village community was founded in southern France, becoming the international headquarters of Tiep Hien, the Order of Interbeing. The Order has since grown into a large international network of associated Buddhist communities. Plum Village, the

Order of Interbeing, and their associated organizations worldwide are committed to numerous different causes in their own communities around the world.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, things began to change. Writing about Tiep Hien in 2000, Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine note that its emphasis appeared to shift from outward, engaged activism and protest to "an individual- and sangha-based engaged practice in the West."[20] The organization began conducting meditation retreats for environmental and peace activists, American Vietnam War veterans, psychologists and writers, as well as non-sectarian retreats for general audiences.[21] Retreats of this kind began to be offered all over the world, and they inspired the foundation of numerous small practice groups associated with the Order of Interbeing worldwide. While the Order's direct activism continues—including speaking tours, publications, prison programs, and assisting the poor in Vietnam—Nhat Hanh's teachings now focus primarily on individuals, families, and sanghas (Buddhist religious communities).

From Activism to Individual Practice

What motivated this change? One factor was the anger that Nhat Hanh had seen among many peace activists. In one instance, when he was speaking in the US during the Vietnam War, an angry young activist shouted at Nhat Hanh, asking why he was in the US, and telling him to go back to Vietnam to fight the American imperialists there. Nhat Hanh said: "I saw the war in him, as a pacifist—because that kind of anger is war itself."[22] Nhat Hanh began to understand that, in order to inspire effective, peaceful activism, it was necessary to first help transform the individual activist. Following his retreat in the 1970s, he therefore began to shift the emphasis of his order's teachings and practices towards personal transformation in the context of supportive spiritual communities.

In addition to the new emphasis on retreats, Tiep Hien has focused its energies since the late 1980s on "mindfulness training," a means of encouraging people—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike—to enact Buddhist-style mindfulness in their everyday lives. When Tiep Hien was originally founded during the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh had written the Order's Fourteen Precepts, guidelines that formed the basis for its members' ethics and activism. Since then, the precepts have been revised several times, with the aim of keeping them relevant as the Order and the world change over time.

Now called the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, these guidelines encourage members to avoid harmful vocations, violence, exploitation, and sexual misconduct; to control anger and speech habits; and to cultivate awareness, not only of the present moment, but of contemporary conditions of suffering and oppression as well. A number of these principles are present in spirit in the traditional Buddhist precepts, but Nhat Hanh presents them in a way that is intended to be more appropriate for the modern world. The first mindfulness training, for example, reads:

> Openness: Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help me learn to look deeply and to develop my understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.[23]

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are not only ethical guidelines; they have become the basis of a series of practices that Tiep Hien members regularly perform. Core members take vows to uphold the trainings in an initiation ceremony. They also meet bi-weekly with their local communities to formally recite all fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. Nhat Hanh describes a ceremony that may accompany the recitation of the Mindfulness Trainings.[24] It begins with the lighting of incense and recitation of an incense-offering verse. The names of significant Buddhas such as Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha), Manjusri (Bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom), and Avalokitesvara (Bodhisattva of compassion) are invoked, and participants bow following each name. A bell is rung and a verse from sutra (scripture) is recited, and then the full recitation of the Mindfulness Trainings begins. As Nhat Hanh writes, "The recitation should be neither too slow nor too quick, as the right speed will please the community."[25] The proper performance of the recitation, therefore, is an important aspect of the ceremony.

Core members also commit to observing at least 60 "Days of Mindfulness" each year. This practice goes back to the 1960s, when the first six members of the Order met each weekend to observe a kind of daylong retreat to renew themselves as they continued to assist victims of the war. Members of the extended Tiep Hien community, who do not formally commit to the Mindfulness Trainings, may attend some of the recita-

tion ceremonies or Mindfulness Days held by their local groups.[26] Local Tiep Hien groups also conduct meditation services, many of which are open to the public.

Another mindfulness practice that Nhat Hanh has advocated in recent years is a kind of meditative breathing exercise. When feeling distracted or overly emotional, practitioners are encouraged to focus on their breathing, concentrating on the flow of air in and out, and being aware of the natural process of the breath. While doing this, practitioners may mentally recite: "Breathing in I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out I know that I am breathing out."[27] This practice can be performed anywhere, at any time. While it is more spontaneous and individual than the more formal Mindfulness Training practices, it is a prescribed spiritual practice that is now widely followed by Nhat Hanh's followers, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, around the globe.

In the 1960s and 70s, Nhat Hanh's writings primarily described the social and political activism that he and his associates were undertaking at that time, along with the spiritual and ethical basis for those undertakings. Since the 1980s, the majority of Nhat Hanh's writings and teachings have emphasized interfaith dialogue, mindfulness, meditation, strong family relationships, and communal spiritual practice. A look at the current Plum Village website reveals the prominence of this new style of teaching. A few articles describe the ongoing social and political activism in which Tiep Hien communities are involved, but by far the most numerous articles are dharma talks, prayers, articles about developing mindfulness and compassion in family relationships, as well as descriptions of the Mindfulness Trainings and the practices that accompany them. The majority of the links on the site, therefore, relate to personal spiritual growth rather than overtly engaged political or social activism.

If, as King argues, the defining principle of Engaged Buddhism is the imperative for direct action in the world, does this new focus on meditation and mindfulness represent a failure to act, in the engaged Buddhist sense? In interviews with American members of the Order of Interbeing, Hunt-Perry and Fine found that some members lament the change, arguing that it represents a withdrawal of the Order from the socially engaged activism that defined it in the past. Others denounced the notion that personal transformation leads to the betterment of society as naïve and idealistic.[28]

In Nhat Hanh's view, however, the move to more individualistic practices does not change Tiep Hien's mandate. As noted, he believes that an important first step in peaceful, effective activism is to help activists free themselves from anger, violence, and despair. He recently expressed this view in a public forum on climate change with Canadian scientist and environmental activist David Suzuki. Nhat Hanh said:

> It's very important to work with our mind. If we allow despair to take over then we will have no strength left to do anything at all. That is why we should do anything we can to prevent despair, including meditation. So when we meditate on civilizations that have been destroyed in the past, and if we can accept, we may have peace and become a better worker for the environment. Because people who know what is happening but allow it to happen and cannot do anything—there are many of them. There are so many because they have despair in them and they try only to survive. If we can help them to sort out their inside and if we can help them to have hope, if we can help them to have peace in themselves, then suddenly they have the strength to come back to themselves … and that person will be an instrument of protection of the environment.[29]

Notably, while participating in this public forum on environmentalism—itself an instance of direct activism—Nhat Hanh took the opportunity to stress the effectiveness of meditation practices for individual activists. He is fully aware that activism can lead to disillusionment and despair in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. Nhat Hanh believes that Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike can guard against these dangers through meditation and mindfulness practices that promote peace and awareness, thus supporting effective, long-term social engagement.

Nhat Hanh's teachings on mindfulness are also intended to transform society at another level. Based in the Buddhist principle of interdependence, or interbeing, his vision stresses the identity of the individual and his or her community, government, and all of humanity. "When you are able to get out of the shell of your small self," Nhat Hanh writes, "you will see that you are interrelated to everyone and everything, that your every act is linked with the whole of humankind and the whole cosmos."[30] The Order's Mindfulness Trainings and their attendant practices are intended to help practitioners develop the ability to step outside of themselves and recognize their interdependence with the rest of humanity. The ethics of his trainings, and the practices themselves, are intended to change the world by changing individuals' beliefs and behaviours on a large scale.

Nhat Hanh's strong sense of interdependence extends to interfaith outreach as well.[31] He believes that non-Buddhists may also be inspired by mindfulness practice and a strong sense of interbeing. He is careful to point out, however, that his teachings are not intended as a means of converting others to Buddhism. "People are stable and happy," he writes, "only when they are firmly rooted in their own tradition and culture."[32] Tailoring many of his teachings and practices to non-Buddhists is seen as a means of encouraging peace and understanding between religious traditions, in addition to reaching a wider audience.

Writing about Nhat Hanh's vision of interbeing, David L. McMahan notes that "through the doctrine of interbeing, moral responsibility is decentered from the solitary individual and spread throughout the entire social system. This is an important element of engaged Buddhism, which again emphasizes systemic and not just individual cases of suffering."[33] Nhat Hanh and many of his followers strongly believe that the transformation of the individual can treat the causes of violence and suffering in Western societies and around the world. In this view, training individuals in mindfulness, compassion, and a sense of interbeing *is* socially engaged.

Practice and Personal Transformation

Even presuming the identity of individual and society, however, Nhat Hanh's vision still depends on the effectiveness of his mindfulness teachings and practices. To what degree might they inspire real change in those following them? It is significant that Nhat Hanh strongly advocates individual and communal practice and ceremonies. It is the ritualized nature of these activities that has the potential to transform the attitudes and behaviours of those performing them. Part of the reason for this is that they are "practices" or "trainings" in a literal sense. That is to say, they involve repetitive performance. Recitation of the Mindfulness Trainings takes place bi-weekly in a formal, standardized manner. The breathing exercises are repetitively performed, ideally training the practitioner to better concentrate and let go of negative emotions. They are, therefore, ways of training body and mind through repetition and refinement, leading to the development of new skills. Elsewhere I have argued that the concentration techniques (or mental "activities") of meditation practice train the mind in the same way that ritualized postures, gestures, and performance train the rest of the body.[34] In this sense, both body and mind (which are not separate in Buddhist worldviews) learn in a physical, embodied way.

However, the recitation ceremonies, Mindfulness days, and breathing exercises are not merely repetitive activities. For members of the Order of Interbeing, they are also special, spiritual, and separate—that is, set aside from the everyday. They are presented by a respected teacher, shared by a spiritual community, and based in an ancient religious tradition. Because of this, the practices connect repeated, embodied performance to practitioners' emotions, values, and behaviour. In other words, Tiep Hien mindfulness practices have the potential to link psychomotor training, or repetitive physical performance, to affective change.

Learning on an affective level begins with sensitivity and attentiveness to new emotions and attitudes. As affective learning progresses, the learner responds to the new emotions and attitudes, "valuing" or attaching value to them, and then either rejecting or accepting and committing to them. Acceptance and commitment create a new value system by which the learner begins to voluntarily adjust his or her behaviour. With time, the new value system may be internalized to the point at which it influences behaviour, in predictable ways, at a less conscious level. This last affective process is referred to as "characterizing values."[35]

This, therefore, is the "noetic" function of ritual practice, as argued by Theodore Jennings. Ritual performance is not only a means of learning how to perform a ritual; it is also a means of learning how it is with the world, and how to be in the world, according to the worldviews performatively embodied in the ritual itself.[36] Through ritual performance, therefore, the ethics and values of Nhat Hanh's Mindfulness Trainings are literally embodied. Discussing the links between ethics and activism in Engaged Buddhism, King points out that it is through moral and spiritual development that "one is progressively becoming more and more capable of altruism, manifested in behaviour that is selfless and beneficent."[37] The principles being embodied—and thus reinforced at the psychomotor and affective levels—are believed to be a necessary first step in developing altruistic, non-attached action in the world.

Nhat Hanh argues for the need to have a stable base of inner peace in order to be able to effectively address injustice and suffering. Knowing that activism can lead to burnout or apathy among activists, his objective is to ensure that Buddhist spirituality is not left behind as the tradition becomes more socially and politically engaged. Buddhist ethics and spiritual principles, embodied practices, and a strong spiritual community can help activists

maintain a lifelong commitment to the causes that are dear to them. Hunt-Perry and Fine agree:

> It appears to us that Thich Nhat Hanh—in looking deeply at the roots of violence, loneliness, materialism and sorrow in Western society—has correctly seen that individual and family healing is a necessary link to cultural and political transformation. We believe that changes in public policy can indeed be advanced as socially engaged activists strengthen their individual and collective practice of mindfulness as a foundation for their activism.[38]

The Order of Interbeing is, of course, still characterized by its goal to nurture social action among Buddhists.[39] While its means of doing so involve a reduced emphasis on overt activism, its reach has been extended beyond the Buddhist community to other socially minded people around the globe. I do not disagree with King's statement in the epigraph of this article: the defining characteristic of Engaged Buddhism is indeed an emphasis on practical action in the world. However, on the one hand, for practical action to be effective, it must be undertaken by activists who have been properly prepared to face the enormous challenges of making positive change in this world. On the other, "practice," where it effectively transforms individuals, itself constitutes practical action. Thich Nhat Hanh has shown that traditional Buddhist ethical, meditative, and mindfulness practice can be an important means of preparing activists to meet the challenges of the world today. Even more directly, Nhat Hanh's vision of interbeing means that the transformation of the individual *is* the transformation of society. As Hunt-Perry and Fine put it, "embodying peace is itself a cultural transformation."

Patricia Campbell is the author of *Knowing Body, Moving Mind: Ritualizing and Learning at Two Buddhist Centers* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

1 Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia,* eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1–44.

2 Ibid., 20.

3 Ibid., 10.

4 Ibid., 16–20.

5 Ibid., 17.

6 King demonstrates that early Buddhist doctrine supports the following characteristics of Engaged Buddhism: natural law; progressive altruism; principles, prototypes and virtues; non-adversariality; non-judgmentalism; pragmatism; the imperative to act; and nonviolence. See Sallie B. King, "Elements of Engaged Buddhist Ethical Theory," in *Destroying Mara Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown*, eds., John Powers and Charles S. Prebish (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2009), 187–203.

7 Ibid., 200.

8 Ibid., 201.

9 See Chân Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned & Practiced Social Change in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

10 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 28.

11 Chân Không, *Learning True Love*, 71.

12 Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action," in Queen and King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism* 321–63.

13 Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*. 3.

14 Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 92.

15 Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Paralax Press, 1987), 65; and Chân Không, *Learning True Love*, 65, 114–18.

16 King, *Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*, 335–37.

17 Ibid., 324.

18 Ibid., 325.

19 Ibid.

20 Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed., Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000,) 61.

21 Ibid., 40.

22 *Peace Is Every Step*, prod. Gaetano Maida (Legacy Media, Inc, Mystic Fire, 1997), DVD.

23 "Mindfulness Training." *Plum Village*. Last modified August 2009. http://www.plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice.html (accessed January 21, 2012).

24 Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*. 11–13.

25 Ibid., 11.

26 Ibid., 73.

27 Plum Village, *Mindfulness Training*.

28 Hunt-Perry and Fine, *All Buddhism Is Engaged*, 61.

29 Hoggan & Associates Inc., "Thich Nhat Hanh and David Suzuki in Conversation About the Health of the Planet," August 19, 2011. http://www.hoggan.com/blog/2011/08/thich-nhat-hanh-and-david-suzuki-conversation-about-health-planet (accessed January 21, 2012).

30 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 106.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 196.

33 David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 175.

34 See Patricia Q. Campbell, *Knowing Body, Moving Mind: Ritualizing and Learning at Two Buddhist Centers* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2011.

35 See D.R. Krathwohl, et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook II: Affective Domain* (New York: David McKay, 1973).

36 Theodore W. Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 326.

37 King, *Elements of Engaged Buddhist Ethical Theory*, 190.

38 Hunt-Perry and Fine, *All Buddhism Is Engaged*, 61.

39 King, *Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*, 321.

Directions for Canada's Office of Religious Freedom[1]

John Siebert
Project Ploughshares

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird is in charge of implementing the government's commitment to open an Office of Religious Freedom (ORF) in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). What the Office will actually do will not be known until it is opened and an ambassador named, but its work holds the promise to advance peace and human security in regions where religion is a significant factor in armed conflict and armed violence. Initial indications are that Baird has received good advice in developing the principles for the Office, but the proof will be in the implementation pudding. To succeed over time, the ORF needs to be properly grounded in international human rights standards and implemented impartially and in a non-partisan fashion. The advancement of religious freedom in the world as a key Canadian foreign policy objective also will require intensive diplomacy and close work with civil society organizations, which to date have not been priorities for this government.

In this article, I want to provide some background for the ORF and suggest a number of directions that will be crucial for broadly supported and effective work on religious freedom.

The ORF—A Good Idea?

Providing a focus and expertise within Foreign Affairs on the role of religion in foreign policy is not a completely new development. As Geoffrey Cameron has written,

> In 1998, Lloyd Axworthy announced that addressing religious intolerance would be a thematic priority for DFAIT. In 2004, the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Development adopted a resolution that urged the Government of Canada "to make the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion and belief a central element of its efforts to defend human rights internationally."[2]

In the late 1990s, Canadian religious leaders were in direct conversation with Foreign Affairs to establish such an office, but the process was not successful at the time.

These efforts drew in part on the "human dimension" activities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the regional multilateral forum embracing Europe, Central Asia, the US, and Canada (Vancouver to Vladivostok), with its roots in the 1970s Helsinki Accords. Problems related to religious freedom and minority rights, particularly in the territories of the former Soviet Union and East Bloc states, had resulted in devastating violent conflicts. Post–Cold War, the OSCE became a laboratory for innovative responses to these conflicts.

The proposal for introducing religion into foreign policy stems from the Conservatives' platform for the 2011 federal election, which contained an entry entitled "Defending Religious Freedom." In brief terms, it promises to

> … create a special Office of Religious Freedom in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade to monitor religious freedom around the world, to promote religious freedom as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy, and to advance policies and programs that support religious freedom.[3]

In an address to Office of Religious Freedom stakeholders, Minister Baird provided his rationale for the ORF. It is based on the premise that religious freedom promotes freedoms of all kinds. Like the canary in a coal mine, where religious freedom was not respected, other human rights would suffer and, ultimately, democracy would be undermined. Respect for religions plays a foundational role in establishing and maintaining secular liberal democracy.[4] According to Baird, then, the ORF will "promote and protect freedom of religion and belief" as a means to foster a type of democracy familiar to Canadians. "Canada is uniquely placed to protect and promote religious freedom around the world," Baird declared. With its particular experience of religious tolerance and respect for freedom of religion and belief, Canada can authentically advance religious freedom to the rest of the world. This is, in effect, Canada's version of exceptionalism.

For the most part, the Conservative government has chosen to frame the ORF in broad terms. Let me suggest

more specifically two reasons why the ORF is, in principle, a good idea whose time has come.

First, religion is an important motivating force in people's lives and actions, and therefore has a direct impact on foreign policy. This point has been made with clarity and precision by Thomas Farr, the first Director of the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom. In 2008, on the tenth anniversary of the passage of the law establishing that office, Farr published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* on the role of religious freedom in foreign affairs. The article is worth reading for many reasons, not least of them being the eerily prophetic paragraphs describing the dilemma the US would face should Egypt ever have free and fair democratic elections. Farr accurately predicted the election of a president and parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, a reality being puzzled over by the Obama Administration in 2012.[5] Farr pointed out that decades-long US support of the Mubarak regime, and the US's refusal to talk with the Muslim Brotherhood to understand its goals and methods, would leave the administration flummoxed.

This illustrates Farr's larger point: that religion continues to play a prominent role in human affairs and, therefore, in the affairs of states and the international community. Ignorance of religion or a rejection of its importance for foreign policy is a recipe for trouble. "Religion is normative, not epiphenomenal, in human affairs."[6] Religion is important in foreign policy not only because it is a primary motivation for terrorist acts by violent minorities within major religions. We are reminded of Baird's remarks when Farr says that "religious ideas and actors can buttress and expand ordered liberty.… History, moreover, suggests that protecting religious freedom and harnessing it for the common good are vital if democracy is to endure."[7]

Some Canadian commentators were dismayed that Farr was part of Baird's stakeholder consultation in October 2011, fearing undue influence on Canada's ORF by the US State Department. I take his presence as a positive sign that Canada is willing to learn from the US experience. Farr is constructive, but highly critical of the limited implementation of the US office and of the handicaps imposed on its efforts to view religious freedom broadly as a positive contributor to US foreign policy and the spread of genuine democracy.

Second, for Canada to contribute substantially to the global advance of religious freedom through the ORF, it must engage in intensive diplomacy and active collaboration with civil society organizations in Canada and abroad. With the establishment of the ORF, the Harper government will need to take another look at its relationship with Canadian and overseas civil society organizations (CSOs). No matter how it approaches its task, the ORF will face inherent limitations as an instrument of government in a field dealing primarily with non-governmental actors. (The exception is in countries where there is a fusion between state and faith, such as Iran, that requires a different approach.[8]) Faith-based organizations are the largest, best-connected, and best-equipped CSOs in the world. They are present almost everywhere. They connect to each other across borders. They embody and speak for the hopes and hurts of those who are systematically denied the benefits of religious freedom.

In the recent past, the government has cut funding to many Canadian NGOs, including human rights defenders, women's groups, and development organizations. The implication is that these groups are not useful or relevant in meeting Canada's international goals. But these are exactly the groups with deep roots in Canadian society and with extensive contacts and experience working with religious and other minorities facing persecution and discrimination around the world. For the ORF to effectively advance religious freedom internationally, it must constructively engage with a broad cross-section of NGOs and CSOs, faith-based and secular.

Naturally, choices will need to be made about where Canada focuses its attention, because the ORF in particular and Foreign Affairs in general do not have the resources to respond to all global concerns. In making those choices, the ORF and the minister of Foreign Affairs will need the advice of others. Regular consultations with advocates of religious freedom, from Canada and select overseas locations, will at least provide a range of opinion from which to draw guidance.

Four Challenges Facing the ORF

Skeptical Diplomats

Canadian diplomats will need to get on board the good ship Religious Freedom. It will not be an easy sell. The leader or ambassador of the ORF will be appointed by the government, but the staff of the ORF will be Foreign Affairs insiders who can work the system at HQ, with support from staff posted abroad to be eyes and ears at the locations where religious freedom needs promoting by Canada. There is a palpable phobia among most Canadian diplomats to a focus on the role of reli-

gion in foreign policy. I can attest to this after having briefly worked in Foreign Affairs, from 1982 to 1986, and also having spent 25 years returning to the department periodically as a public policy staffer for various faith-based non-governmental agencies. Some of the reasons for the skepticism are biographical. In keeping with demographic trends in Canadian society, many current Canadian diplomats have little personal experience with organized religion beyond childhood exposure or in rights-of-passage settings—when people are hatched, matched, and dispatched, as the old joke goes. Although some are deeply religious, they generally keep this private, as their jobs require relating to a wide range of people and places. Religious identity can be a conversation stopper in the secularized milieu of political Ottawa.

Currently, there are no incentives for Canadian diplomats to become adept at navigating the arcane waterways of the world's religions. If there were, religion, at one level, would become just one more area of knowledge to be explored and mastered. During my brief career as a Canadian diplomat, I was once lectured by a person from Agriculture Canada about my ignorance on the significance of pulses. (These are beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas, and other crops with high amounts of fibre and protein.) On another occasion I received mild ridicule for my lack of knowledge about the relative value of various lengths of asbestos fibres. (Canada sells both abroad, although the word "unfortunately" should be inserted regarding asbestos.) In each case, I learned enough to do the job at hand.

Canadian diplomats could take the same approach to religion. Every day, they effectively communicate across linguistic, cultural, and other barriers to promote and advance Canadian interests. Some diplomats are already quite adept at working with religious actors, whether they themselves are religious or not. The difference introduced by the ORF is the elevation of religious freedom as a *key objective* of Canadian foreign policy.

Elsewhere I have written about the need for officials to take a functional practitioners' approach when encountering religion and religious actors in situations of violent conflict: "They should learn the facts about the religion as they would learn the facts about an industrial sector of the economy, without expecting or pretending to know the most closely held trade secrets."[9] Farr makes a similar point: "Policymakers should approach religion much as they do economics and politics—that is, as something that drives the behavior of people and governments in important ways. Like political and economic motives, religious motives can act as a multiplier of both destructive and constructive behaviors, often with more intense results."[10]

For religious freedom to become a "key foreign policy goal" at Foreign Affairs, it must be elevated from its current position as a subset of the broader human rights agenda. Human rights, although important in Canadian foreign policy, is not a functional area of expertise for ambitious diplomats. It's long-term, detailed grunt work: tracking violations and violators, and confronting them in statements; inserting chilly messages for political masters to deliver; going to mind- and butt-numbing international meetings where systematic human rights abusers routinely participate in the deliberations that condemn them.

Also, moving religious freedom to the forefront of diplomatic priorities requires a more intensive tilling of the intellectual soil. Convincing policy briefs and practical examples of utility, which go beyond ministerial announcements, must circulate and be debated and absorbed. This would also prove helpful in securing multiparty buy-in of the underlying policy to make religious freedom a key Canadian foreign policy objective. The added benefit would be that the ORF would survive the current government. With longevity comes policy commitment and individual career advancement in Canada's permanent bureaucracy.

The mandate for the US State Department's office was established in the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998. Canada's ORF has no such legislative mandate, although a sub-legislative tool such as an Order in Council may be signed in establishing it. Of course, this does not provide for public debate in the way that introducing legislation into Parliament could. Even if the legislative route is not taken, however, the ORF could receive parliamentary scrutiny at the committee level, which would allow debate and suggestions from experts on how the ORF can best accomplish its goals.

In building support for the ORF, the Department of Foreign Affairs also can look to other Ottawa players to advance religious freedom abroad. For example, according to its website, the Department of Canadian Heritage is active in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe human dimension forums. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) "supports efforts to respond to, and combat, hate crimes and incidents of racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of intolerance, including against Muslims."[11] The ORF can also draw on expertise in other

departments that work with diverse religious communities in Canada and abroad.

Avoiding Imbalance and Partisanship

Dr. Nathan Funk, a professor in the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Conrad Grebel University College in the University of Waterloo, reminds us that well-intentioned efforts can have unintended consequences: "If you're going to promote religious human rights as a matter of foreign policy, you have to do it in an objective, even-handed, inclusive, reflective, dialogue-based way—otherwise there's lots of potential to do as much harm as good."[12] The ORF will need to use the right dialogue processes with the right people and organizations, without becoming bogged down.

To establish and genuinely embed religious freedom as a key objective in Canadian foreign policy, both policy and practice must be balanced and non-partisan. Programs and pronouncements intended to advance religious freedom must be sensitive to the problems and complications that arise when religious freedom is compromised. No particular religion should be favoured. Religious freedom should not inappropriately trump other human rights concerns, such as the rights of women and sexual orientation. And the pursuit of religious freedom abroad must not be dominated by domestic, partisan political concerns. Local concerns among diaspora communities in Canada also cannot be allowed to skew policy implementation. The point here is that the ORF must avoid capture by special interests.

It is encouraging, then, to learn that Minister Baird is committed to a balanced approach. At the Religious Liberty Dinner in Washington, DC, in May 2012, he said, "Like the United States, we realize that we cannot be selective in which basic human rights we defend, nor can we be arbitrary in whose rights we protect."[13] Moreover, in a speech a few months earlier at the OSCE Ministerial meeting in Lithuania, Baird stated that he would not sacrifice some human rights for the sake of religious freedom: "The Office will promote freedom of religion and belief—and the ability to practice one's religion—as key objectives of Canada's foreign policy."[14] He also spoke about sexual orientation, as he did in his UN speech in Fall 2011: "We also need to take steps to ensure that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is not allowed under law. It is unacceptable that people in the OSCE region can still be attacked and imprisoned simply for their sexual orientation."[15]

The Religious Liberty speech, however, raised a potential red flag about the Minister's non-partisanship. He said:

> And yet, after the Second World War, some decision makers lost sight of our proud tradition to do what is right and just. Some decided it would be better to paint Canada as a so-called honest broker. I call it being afraid to take a clear position … even when that's what's needed. So I'm proud to say Canada no longer simply "goes along to get along" in the conduct of its foreign policy. We will stand for what is principled and just, regardless of whether it is popular, convenient or expedient.[16]

Of course, Baird was referring to what he and the prime minister consider to be less-than-worthy previous Liberal led–government support by Canada for Israel.

In this speech, Baird effectively conflates the rights of Israel and the Jewish people with the fight against terrorism and anti-Semitism. How will the ORF deal with the religious rights of Palestinians in a balanced way in light of this government's overarching support of Israel? Further complicating this scenario is the precarious plight of minority Palestinian Christians among their Muslim neighbours. To succeed over time, the ORF must handle these types of delicate and complex situations with sensitivity and full awareness of the religious situation on the ground.

Handling Contradictions Between Principle and Interest

The difficulty in reconciling policy on the Middle East with a balanced approach to religious freedom points to the broader problem of reconciling human rights promotion with other Canadian foreign policy priorities. Baird's Washington speech was replete with examples of named countries—Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Nigeria, Mali, Burma—and their problematic treatment of religious minorities. One intriguing sentence caused me to pause: "Elsewhere, Roman Catholic priests and other Christian clergy and laity are driven underground to worship, while their leaders are detained by the state."[17] Having been on the China/Hong Kong desk at Foreign Affairs HQ in the early 1980s, I find it impossible not to substitute "Elsewhere" with "China." And yet Baird does not say "China." I recognize this as part of the dance between economic and trade relations and human rights concerns that has dominated Canada's relations with China since recognition and opening of

diplomatic relations in 1970. The ORF will have to navigate many such tensions. Baird will need to draw on the wisdom of Solomon to "divide the baby," so to speak, so that both promoting religious freedom and the economic drive to sell Canadian wheat, oil, or hockey pucks can co-exist as priorities. At stake is the moral principle of religious freedom versus economic national interest. The open-ended question is whether moral principles can trump economic interest when truly difficult situations arise.

Deciding on a Narrow or Broad Approach to Religious Freedom

Will the ORF choose a narrow or broad approach to promoting religious freedom? A narrow approach would focus on a strict interpretation of civil rights, such as opposing overt religious persecution and seeking to free religious prisoners from jail. A broader interpretation would address the balance between overlapping authorities of religion and state, and consider how religiously grounded norms could influence public policy.

In his criticism of the implementation of the US International Religious Freedom legislation, Farr writes that most State Department officials approach religion with ambivalence, fear, and a belief that religion really is irrelevant in modern society. Religion is perceived as emotive, irrational, or too complicated and sensitive. As a result, consideration of religion in high foreign policy is marginalized as a humanitarian or cultural issue.[18]

This narrow understanding results in limited diplomatic activity: documenting and denouncing violations and violators of religious freedom. Unfortunately, naming and shaming alone rarely provide lasting results. Where successful, this can result in meaningful change for a few, but the governing regimes of many states have no shame and are unmoved by denunciations. Even then, stopping persecution or bad laws does not mean religious freedom has been achieved. Promoting religious freedom is much broader. Religious people and organizations must have the freedom to practise their religion or beliefs and actively engage in public life to influence public policy "within the bounds of liberal norms."[19]

A broad view of religious freedom includes the right of religious communities to participate in society within the general framework of the rule of law. Concrete indications of religious freedom include the following:

- Domestic remedies and recourse to the courts to resolve disputes between religious groups and the state or with individuals and other religious groups.
- Dialogue between religious groups and the state on social issues and political life is encouraged.
- The state is restricted from using religion for political advantage, to pursue inappropriate nationalist goals, or for war propaganda.
- Religious groups can structure their own internal affairs, educate their children, and form and direct charitable enterprises to meet the needs of their members and others.
- Individuals have the freedom to follow a religion, or not, and to change religions if they desire.
- Objections of conscience are recognized and accommodated, whether in relation to military service, medical treatment (e.g., vaccinations and blood products), or the provision of religious services in institutions such as prisons.

In other words, the state acknowledges and implements its international, regional, and national human rights commitments.[20]

If the vision of religious freedom to be supported by Canada's ORF is broad rather than narrow, it will need to provide programming support to help other countries achieve it. Clearly, the Conservative election platform commitment points in this direction: to advance "policies and programs that support religious freedom."[21] Tools and funding available in other federal departments and agencies, including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), will need to be engaged.

Intensive Diplomacy

Repeated cuts to Foreign Affairs budgets by the Harper government since it came to power in 2006 indicate the government's less than enthusiastic support for intensive diplomatic activity in the advancement of Canadian interests internationally. Instead, the Harper government has made a strong military the foundation of its foreign policy, while also making humanitarian contributions to crisis spots and negotiating free trade deals with all who are willing. Referencing these three foreign policy pillars, Harper has described Canada in the world as a courageous warrior, compassionate neighbour, and confident partner.[22]

The primary activities of the ORF offer Foreign Affairs the possibility of re-engaging its traditional diplomatic persuasion skills in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, whether or not diplomats are convinced that religious freedom is the "key foreign policy objective." Canada's ability to be a game changer for religious freedom in another state clearly cannot depend on military

displays of strength, with or without allies, or on trade liberalization initiatives.

Coercion can change behaviour in the short term, but sustained change must come from within. Carrots (economic and aid) and sticks (withdrawal of assistance and sanctions) may influence some regimes, but cannot create the positive internal momentum for lasting change and reform. As Farr concludes in his analysis of US policy in the Middle East, "extremism and terrorism [in Islam] can in the final analysis only be defeated by Muslims speaking from the heart of Islam."[23]

Conclusion

Minister Baird and the Conservative government have indicated that they aspire to fulfill a broad mandate for Canada's Office of Religious Freedom—not just enumerating and hectoring delinquents, but actually promoting substantive freedom of religion and belief. Curiously, the rolling out of the ORF and the naming of an ambassador appear to have been delayed, which has caused some observers to become ever more suspicious, leading to questions such as "Where's our Ambassador for Religious Freedom?"[24] and pre-rollout conclusions such as "'Religious freedom' sends the wrong message to the wrong people."[25] But once in place, the success of the ORF will require at least the following:

- Convincing a skeptical foreign affairs establishment of the need and relevance of religious freedom as a key objective of foreign policy;
- Grounding the ORF's work in national, regional, and international human rights commitments to freedom of religion and belief;
- Commitment to a balanced and non-partisan approach to advancing religious freedom;
- Continually sorting out the contradictions between advancing religious freedom and other foreign policy priorities;
- Engaging in intensive diplomacy to advance religious freedom;
- Willingness to build commitment and support across political party lines;
- Resources for programming to nurture religious freedom; and
- Regular and meaningful consultation and engagement with NGOs and CSOs.

For now, we wait.

John Siebert is Executive Director of Project Ploughshares, an agency of the Canadian Council of Churches tasked with promoting policies and practices that contribute to national and international justice, security, and peace.

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17 Ibid.

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19 Ibid., 116.

20 Freedom of religion is provided for in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), articles 18 and 27 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950), article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights (1969), and article 8 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981).

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