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The Beauty of Ten Thousand Blooming Flowers Towards a Feminist Approach to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

For twenty years or more I have been involved in interreligious dialogue and multi-religiousness. In this essay I would like to report on how the journey has been up until now with the aid of the travel guides that I have been using. The first travel guide is philosophical-theological in essence. I shall explain how such a guide works and what its perspectives and blind spots are.

My second travel guide deals with the practical-spiritual areas that are inherent in every religious tradition. Peaks and abysses which are explored with great effort and sometimes joy form the starting point for this guide. Suggestions are made about ways to move from one religious tradition to areas of another one.

The third travel guide is not initially directed at inter-religiousness at all, but rather deals with ordinary contact between human beings and poses questions such as “Who are you? What have you experienced? Which were the peak experiences in your life, and what were the bad ones? How have you dealt with them? What was it that supported you and what carried you through?” To my astonishment this guide revealed a new layer of interreligious exchange and multi-religiousness, showing that amidst great differences there is also immense solidarity. The uniqueness and glow of each separate believer or non-believer contribute to the radiance of the whole, which is not only a collection of individuals but also a wonderful network of connections.

Whilst working with this guide, I recently became aware of another increasingly popular travel guide for the interreligious and multi-religious adventure. This has as starting point the whole of living nature and the care and responsibility that we share together. Although I have not used this guide to a large extent, I would like to portray its possibilities.

Finally, I would like to explore the growing feminist perspectives in the travel guides that I have been using.

Experience with the philosophical-theological travel guide

The philosophical-theological travel guide for interreligious dialogue is directed at important insights and dogmas from religious traditions and tries to compare them with each other. The question arises whether the term “God” from the Christian tradition is comparable with the term *sunyata* from the Buddhist tradition. The latter stands for emptiness and is considered the highest reality within certain sections of Buddhism. Another example of such a question is the Christian term *agape* (love), comparable with the Buddhist term *karuna* (compassion). This form of interreligious dialogue is often practised by religious specialists, who are well-versed in their own traditions and then continue to acquire knowledge of another religion. They study important books of the other tradition and confer with its representatives, usually fellow religious specialists at conferences. These religious specialists are by and large males.

I myself was especially involved with this particular type of interreligious dialogue and multi-religiousness during my work on my Ph.D thesis. I compared the views on death of a modern Christian scholar, Wolfgang Pannenberg (*1928), with the modern Buddhist scholar Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990). I analysed various difficult concepts and tried to compare them as well as possible. With the study of several years of theology behind me and, therefore, some knowledge of the Christian tradition, I was especially attracted to the intellectual exploration of Buddhism and saw it as an exciting adventure. A completely new world was revealed to me with a different vision of life and death. An important finding in my thesis is that both the Buddhist and the Christian ways of thinking have their own distinctiveness and cannot be reduced to a common form.¹

A question that remained was: “Do I have to choose between these two modes?” I found that a tough question, as I felt attracted to both. I even wanted them both! This desire prompted me to try another one of the travel guides, but firstly some advantages and disadvantages of the philosophical-theological travel guide for interreligious dialogue and multi-spirituality.

A great advantage for users of this method is that he/she is forced to enter the tradition at a deep level. An important proof of this is that any reflections must be recognisable for members of the other tradition, demanding an in-depth knowledge. My experience of being deeply involved in another tradition brings a sense of great enrichment.

¹ Christa Anbeek, *Denken over de dood: De boeddhist Nishitani en de christen Pannenberg vergeleken* (Kok: Kampen 1994).

A disadvantage of this method is that only a small percentage of women participate. This may be due to the fact that it has been the custom for both Buddhism and Christianity to exclude women from higher religious functions, therefore discouraging them intellectually from becoming religious specialists. The lack of female participants is reflected in the choice of the subject-matter which is considered important for interreligious dialogue.

A second disadvantage is the limitation of the intellectual approach. Even though one may be knowledgeable about another tradition, one can fail to know how to live such a tradition. Buddhism, or any other religious tradition for that matter, is not only about insights but rather about a life based on these insights. Therefore every tradition has spiritual exercises and directions for life itself.

These two disadvantages spurred to me to look for yet another travel guide. This was not difficult as there are many on offer. “If you really want to learn to know us” said the Buddhists I encountered, “you must not only learn to know our books but also our spiritual practices”. So I followed their advice.

Experiences with the practical-spiritual travel guide

Prior to the writing of any travel guides there are pioneers who go out on their own to explore paths without any form of navigation. Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle (1898-1990) was such a pioneer in the domain of Buddhist and Christian dialogue. He worked as a missionary in Japan and participated for the first time in a Buddhist meditation week in 1943. His motive for doing this was to become acquainted with the richness of Buddhism. Soon he noticed that meditation had a profound influence on his own spirituality. Throughout his life he wrote prolifically about Buddhist and Christian spirituality and supervised numerous meditation courses.

Inspired by pioneers such as Lasalle and others, many people were willing to explore the path of multi-spirituality. One of the initiatives that has been taken in this area is the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. This is an exchange programme for Buddhist and Christian monks and nuns which has existed since 1979. Participants stay in the monastery of the other tradition for a number of weeks and participate as much as possible in aspects of that tradition such as religious ceremonies, daily chores and prayers and meditation.

An exchange program also started in the United States of America offering in particular the possible exchange of religious from Tibet. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton, a learned author of works on contemplative spirituality and the Dalai Lama, were involved in this exchange programme. These exchanges are on-going up to the present day.

My own encounter with practical-spiritual exchange was through my work at the Tiltenberg centre. At this centre Buddhist meditation courses were given by various Zen masters from both my own country and abroad. Here I was given the responsibility of co-ordinating the Zen programmes and it was part of my duty to be present at the meditations when possible. Hours, days and weeks on end I meditated in an upright position with my face to the wall and heard lectures from masters from Japan, India, America, France, Sweden, England and the Netherlands. Besides the meditation weeks, we also organised conferences in which we reflected on what the Buddhist and the Christian paths have to offer each other.

A great advantage of this travel guide compared with the intellectual form of dialogue, is that the whole body participates (thus) leading to even greater discoveries. Many monks and nuns who participated indicated that they had discovered through Buddhist meditation how important the body and the breath are for experiencing spirituality. Through the body a dimension opens up which goes beyond thinking and channels one into a deep stillness. In this state of stillness a reality can be observed about which, for instance, the Desert Fathers have written. The heart of Buddhist and Christian spirituality seems to lead to the same source.²

A disadvantage of this path is that it often causes tension within Christian communities. Many Christians are not interested as their own tradition offers enough guidance on how to live their lives. Others consider it risky to get too intensively involved. Will you lose your own faith? What do I need besides Christ? Dealing with these questions is not always easy. The Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue in the Netherlands, for instance, has led a number of pioneers to leave their monastic communities. Discovering the deep unity between Buddhists and Christians may therefore have a boomerang effect. How then can we cope with these problems within our own communities? How can we understand and appreciate each other amidst vast differences? In this context I became acquainted with another travel guide in a very different setting.

Experience with the inter-human travel guide

For the past nine years I have been working as a pastoral carer in a psychiatric institution. There I have to deal with people from totally different religious

² Christa Anbeek, *Zin in zen. De aantrekkingskracht van het zenboeddhisme in België en Nederland* (Asoka: Rotterdam 2003).

backgrounds and also cope with diverse forms of illness, educational levels, social backgrounds and family histories. They all share the experience that life at times stagnates. Unexpected problems can arise that place life in a different perspective.

I have noticed how important it is for people to be able to talk about their lives. Not only about current difficulties but also about their pasts, their work, their education, about what they consider really important and valuable, about problems they had encountered and how they resolved them. And also about their futures: what they would like to take up again, new ventures they hope for despite the definitive change of their lives. Group discussions show that people like to listen to one another's stories. It is inspiring to discover that each life history has known highs and lows and then to observe how people move on despite difficulties. The sharing of joy and sorrow can create bonds despite differences in personal histories. It struck me that when people are asked about important events in their lives, they seldom talk about their religion. They talk about their childhood, a sick mother, meeting the ideal partner even if it failed to work out, about their children, about work that gave their lives meaning. Some only mention religion when asked about life supports. When this happens, everyone in the group – religious or not – understands what they mean. The reason for this is that they do not mention dogmas or practices which others might fail to understand, but rather talk about the way faith has developed in their lives. About the comfort it has given them, the doubts, the questions and sometimes resignation to the fact that faith and life itself remain incomprehensible.

These insights have led to an awareness which I now refer to as the narrative interreligious dialogue. Primary questions here are: "Who are you?" "What have you been through?" and then "How have you coped with all that crossed your path", and finally "What has been your source of strength?" The diverse answers to the last question can only be understood in relation to the answers to the previous questions. Insight into a person's religious history and choices can only be attained by understanding his or her life story.³

The inter-human travel guide has the advantage that the many answers to the question "What has supported you" is not a weakness but a strength. A huge

³ Christa Anbeek, *Mimi and Akiko* (Asoka: Rotterdam 2005); Manuela Kalsky / Ida Overdijk / Inez van der Spek (eds), *Moderne devoties: Vrouwen over geloven* (De Prom: Amsterdam / Antwerpen 2005).

diversity of creativity and inspiration of equal value is revealed. Behind religious and spiritual differences is the shared adventure of being human, in which sooner or later everyone is confronted with joy and sorrow, health and illness, birth and death – together with the challenge of coping strategies. The ten thousand blooming flowers of spirituality and vitality that have been revealed to me in psychiatry have prompted my awareness of the last travel guide.

Experience with the ecosophical travel guide

This travel guide has been in existence longer than it seems as many of its aspects are familiar from books read in the past. There are several thinkers and activists that have paved the way for this guide. One example is the Norwegian Arne Naess (*1912), an academic philosopher, mountaineer and activist. An important aim of his is to inspire actions that foster the growth of diversity of life on earth. Another writer in this guide is Joanna Macy (*1929), eco-philosopher, Buddhist scientist and social activist. Inspired by her Buddhist belief she works on the liberation of all suffering in this world, not only that of humans but also of plants, animals, polluted rivers and air. Many other individuals and organisations base their reflection on Christian, Buddhist, Confucianist, Islamic, Hinduist, Jewish or humanistic inspiration, and also make a practical contribution towards the maintenance of our earth. In particular I would like to mention the *Forum on Religion and Ecology* in Harvard.⁴

Ecosophy stresses the diversity and richness of cultures and life forms. Furthermore, it encourages people to open their eyes to the fact that amidst this diversity we form one global community which is extremely vulnerable. Ecosophy seeks unity amidst diversity and finds this in our common responsibility for a viable global society which is based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. Important principles for building a justified, sustainable and peaceful global society are specified in the declaration *Earth Charter*, in which thousands of organisations worldwide have cooperated, together representing millions of individuals. The document contains fifteen principles, divided into four chapters: 1. respect and care for all living forms. 2. ecological integrity. 3. social and economic justice and 4. democracy, non-violence and peace. *Earth Charter* has, moreover, developed

⁴ Cf. <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html>.

a programme concerning religion and sustainability, and hopes to assemble and strengthen various initiatives and the work of several institutions.⁵

During the international Grail conference I was in a position to experience some of the potential of the ecosophical travel guide for multi-religiousness. Originally the Grail movement was a Catholic international womens' movement, founded in the Netherlands in the second decade of the twentieth century.⁶ After the Second World War the movement spread across the world to eighteen countries and broadened its content as well. It opened its doors to Protestant women and women who felt more at home in Buddhism or nature spirituality. The great diversity of Grail women has for a long time raised the question: "Is there a common spirituality that connects us?" That became the theme of the summer conference in 2007.

At this conference all the travel guides for multi-religiousness discussed above were present. There were also theological contributions and, although they were meant to create common premises, they rather served to make the differences clearer. A Catholic woman in Tanzania may consider other departure points more important than a Buddhist Grail woman from the Netherlands. Various forms of spirituality were put into practice. For instance, there was a Lutheran and a Catholic Eucharistic celebration, a purification ritual from the womens' movement and a meditation in stillness. Everyone participated in the various celebrations which undoubtedly created solidarity and respect but also feelings of strangeness and alienation. During the meals and tea breaks there was ample opportunity to experiment with the narrative approach to multi-religiousness. Many participants regretted that these were not part of the official program. Yet listening to each others stories created bonds even between those living at opposite ends of the earth. The greatest mutual concern became apparent during the two workshops on ecospirituality. The first of these was about human suffering in the world, the second about the suffering of nature. Brazilian women are daily confronted with other forms of suffering – poverty, pollution – than women in Africa – war violence, aids, genetic manipulation – or in Western European countries – alienation, suicides, lack of community spirit, violence in the home. Yet there was unanimity in the desire to act by helping to prevent this suffering. The workshop on the suffering of nature enlarged and deepened the unity of the group. Our footsteps, whether they be in Africa, Brazil or Western Europe touch the same

⁵ Cf. www.earthcharter.org and www.earthcharterinaction.org/religion.

⁶ Cf. www.degraalbeweging.nl.

earth. We are all dependent on clean water and clear air. We share a caring which transcends our differences and which we can work on together from different inspirations. The enthusiasm and the togetherness during these two workshops prompt me to further explore the inter- and multi-religious adventure using the ecosophical travel guide in the coming years.

Finally

In the introduction to this paper I indicated that the travel guides which I have used can be characterised by a growing feministic perspective. My criticism of the philosophical / theological travel guide is that by the excluding-mechanisms inherent in religious traditions the majority of the participants in this form of dialogue are male. This fact is reflected in what choice of subject-matter is considered important and in the manner in which the dialogue is conducted. The practical / spiritual travel guide does have some room for female participants. Moreover, the practical approach of this type of dialogue stimulates reflection which is more specifically directed to the practice of spiritual life as it appears in the publications that emerge from this exchange.⁷ Yet this type of dialogue also suffers from the excluding mechanisms for women inherent in the Buddhist and Christian traditions whereby consequently the majority of publications are from male participants whence, in the main, female experience remains concealed.

This is not the case with the third and fourth travel guides. The starting point of the third travel guide is the individual narratives of suffering and hope, in which both female and male voices are heard, each with their own sound and colour. The fourth travel guide is not only concerned with the experiences and hopes of men and women but also with that of all living creatures with a view to decreasing all suffering. As far as I am concerned the latter is the core and the concern of a feminist approach to interreligious dialogue.

En este artículo son presentados cuatro guías de turistas del diálogo budista-cristiano. Los diferentes guías reflejan el viaje de veinte años de la autora por el diálogo interreligioso y son presentados en el orden cronológico de sus descubrimientos. El

⁷ They deal, for instance, with prayer and meditation, growth and development on the spiritual path, community and supervision, spirituality and society, cf. Donald W. Mitchell / James Wiseman (eds), *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (Continuum: New York 1997); Donald W. Mitchell / James Wiseman (eds), *Transforming Suffering. Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Random House: New York 2003).

primer guía se caracteriza por la perspectiva filosófico-teológica; la segunda es antes bien práctica o espiritual; la tercera perspectiva es narrativa, llamada guía de turista interhumano, y la cuarta es el guía ecosófico del diálogo budista-cristiano. Se debaten las ventajas y los problemas de cada guía, así como la perspectiva cada vez más feminista. Queda claro que cada planteamiento tiene mucho de valioso que ofrecer, pero en las conclusiones la perspectiva interhumana y la ecosófica pasan a primer plano al describirse como las perspectivas del diálogo interreligioso más prometedoras desde la perspectiva feminista.

In diesem Beitrag werden vier Reiseführer zum buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog vorgestellt. Diese Führer spiegeln die Reisen der Autorin durch zwanzig Jahre im interreligiösen Dialog wieder, und sie werden in chronologischer Ordnung ihrer Entdeckung dargestellt. Der erste Führer ist durch einen philosophisch-theologischen Zugang gekennzeichnet, der zweite ist eher praktisch oder spirituell, im dritten wird ein narrativer Zugang oder auch eine zwischenmenschliche Landkarte vorgeführt, und im vierten Reiseführer geht es um einen ökosophischen Zugang zum buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog. Es werden jeweils die Vor- und Nachteile der jeweiligen Zugänge diskutiert sowie ihre zunehmend feministische Perspektive aufgezeigt. Dabei wird deutlich, dass jeder Zugang besondere Vorzüge besitzt, doch in der Schlussfolgerung stellen sich der zwischenmenschliche und der ökosophische Reiseführer als diejenigen heraus, die im interreligiösen Dialog aus feministischer Sicht den besten Erfolg versprechen.

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