

EDITORIAL

This issue of the **Journal of Dharma** considers a few of the numerous aspects of Buddhist encounter with world religions – and indeed, as in the case of any religion's encounter with world religions as a whole, there are so many topics to consider, and no investigation can be anything but extremely limited in scope.

Historically, different religions occupying the same geographical as well as cultural space, or existing in just contiguous geographical areas, putting pressures upon the cultures, have had occasions of encounter with one another concerning several things which define a world religion, including the perception of the right way for human beings to live in the world and belief as to what is the true path to salvation, in principle binding for all. Considering human nature, some of these encounters have led not just to disagreements but to clashes, especially when one of the religions in that situation had a historical, genetical connection with another that may be considered the parent religion. The problem could be just as bad or even worse, if one of the religions in question has been considered an alien introduction, and worse still if it bears a salvational message, accompanied by an obligation either divinely mandated or mandated by the sheer force of truth, or so believed, to spread it globally.

But there is no need to characterize all encounters of the past in such a negative way, for many of them have left creative consequences, philosophical as well as spiritual, some of which have permeated all around, benefitting mutually opposite traditions equally and severally in their future course. However, many more of these consequences, undoubtedly for the good of all around, remain pent-up and ready for intellectual-spiritual appropriation, or at least discovery. Such prospects of appropriation and discovery are after all the best reason for studying the past relation among the great religions. An additional reason is the prospect of gaining the wisdom to avoid the ugly side of such relations in future.

'Future', of course is the key word, as in all good things we hope for, so in respect of interreligious encounter, i.e., inasmuch as/we wish to make it a creative experience rather than destructive in any manner. It behoves us to try as ardently as we can to see that all the present transactions and experiences become the beginning of a great epoch of interreligious relations which promises

to appear. The future in which that epoch is located must be permitted, nay invoked, to shape the character of all inter-religious encounters. We must bend all our efforts to invite the new epoch, and help it to come to strength. We may even discern in it some possibility of defining religion as such in a new way.

In that epoch Buddhism as a religion in encounter with other religions has a very important role to play. It is fact of the case that the inclusion of Buddhism in the world religions has already forced us to come to new understandings of what constitutes religion – and it would be highly improper to view such understandings as merely academic, for indeed first and foremost they are part of a spiritual task. No doubt, as it is, Buddhism possesses stirring credentials for the high place it occupies in the firmament of the phenomena called religions: which are historical, geographical - statistical, cultural, philosophical and spiritual. It still holds sway in very important parts of Asia (not the least Japan). In other parts of Asia where it had spectacular achievements of all the fore-going kinds in the past until our own times, but had passed through the starless night of Marxist revolution in recent decades and had felt the hand of destruction, along with other religions, it like them has lasted through that dark night and is beginning to show signs of survival and even revival.

All these factors come into play in Buddhism's encounter with other world religions. As for dark nights, it is true that other religions too have suffered them and have felt the heavy hand of destruction, and that not only from anti-religious movements but, most ironically, from one another as well. A time is coming when all religions which have had such experience can sit together and compare notes. Each can ask its sister religions "how did you do it, how did you come through?". Buddhism would have a great story to tell. That is one aspect of the encounter of the religions which we must not miss. But then there are other, and more enduring ways of comparing notes as well. They concern the permanently spiritual and philosophical things. Here too Buddhism, in its striking diversity has a very great witness to bear – and as in all great religions diversity does not blot out the wonderful unity of that witness. The benefits such true encounters can bring forth are incalculable.

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