

## INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN TAIWAN

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With their deep rooted spiritual openness and thirst for harmony, the people of Taiwan have transformed their land into an ideal field for the development of a genuine interreligious dialogue and cooperation. In addition to the folk or popular religion, which stands as the religion of the great majority of people, there are in Taiwan twelve "religions" (tsung chiao) officially recognized by the government: Taoism, Buddhism, Liism (founded in Mainland China at the beginning of the eighteenth century), four "new religions" of Chinese origin: TienTeChiao, YiKjanTao, HsuanYuanChiao, TienTiChiao; Catholicism and Protestantism (sadly recorded as two different religions), Islam, Bahai Faith, and Tenrikyo. The folk religion, which incorporates many beliefs and practices of the three major philosophical and religious traditions of China: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, is gradually becoming recognized as a religious system of its own.

There is in Taiwan a growing interest in Taoist studies and it is already clear that Taoist scholars whose research is deeply rooted in a religious faith will play an increasingly important role in the development of interreligious dialogue in this beautiful island. As it was pointed out by one of them at the international seminar (BIRA V/4) held two years ago in Nant'ou, "in Taoism, whether it be philosophical or religious, harmony is the most important goal to be achieved ...; in both philosophical and religious approaches, Taoism advocates the pursuit of inner freedom and immortality". The style of Taoism which is alive and thriving in Taiwan today is a religious and popular Taoism; it is an integral dimension of the folk religion in the rituals of which the great majority of people living in Taiwan are finding much support and help to bring an integrating harmony and peace into their own personal lives, within the community, and between themselves and nature.

In Taiwan, when asked about their religious affiliation, almost half of the people will reply that they are Buddhists. Further questioning however on the subject of beliefs and observance of Buddhist practices reveals in fact that only an estimated 10% of the whole population could realistically be classified as Buddhists. There has been, in the last ten years, an

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extraordinarily rapid development of religious, cultural, social and educational activities and projects initiated in Taiwan by several outstanding Buddhist Masters, all men and women of great vision and deep spiritual experience, endowed with a remarkable sensitivity to the people's deepest aspirations and needs. Among these praiseworthy projects are the recent foundations of no less than five Buddhist universities. Every year now, thousands of faithful follow one of the many seven-day spiritual retreats directed by Chian Masters. New monasteries are being constructed all over the island as hundreds of new monks and nuns are ordained each year. Of course, along with this trend comes a steady and unrelenting increase in the number of believers.

The dialogue between Christians and Buddhists, a dialogue which has deep roots in Taiwan, is now progressing at a fast pace. A major and particularly audacious initiative of the Buddhist community occurred seven years ago with the launching of an idea to create a "World Religions Museum". This project is to take place in Taiwan, and will form a meeting place for people of all faiths and people in search of a faith by which they can live, a place where all can easily learn to understand and respect each other, to share their religious experience, and to work together for the construction of peace in the world. The project is being carried out step by step by the Ling Chiu Shan Prajna Cultural and Educational Foundation and, if everything goes according to plan, the first building of the Museum will be inaugurated in Taipei in the year 2000.

Three other communities of faith are also flourishing. These are deeply rooted in the Confucianist and Taoist traditions, with many elements of their teaching coming from Buddhism as well as Christianity and Islam. All clearly affirm the existence of God, creator and ruler of the universe. Two of them were founded in Mainland China (TienTeChiao, in 1923, and YiKuanTao, in 1930) and were officially recognized in Taiwan about ten years ago. TienTiChiao, of which the founder is also from Mainland China, was established in Taiwan in 1980. YiKuanTao, which has now many branches in the Asian and Western worlds - is now Taiwan's largest religious community (more than three million members) and the most rapidly developing religious movement. Together with HsuanYuanChiao, religion founded in Taiwan in 1957, TiennChiao, YiKuanTao and TienTeChiao have recently formed an "alliance" or "network!" (LienYiHui) which will enable

them to play an increasingly influential role in the development of a deeply rooted religious life in Taiwan.

In contrast with the flourishing "Chinese religions", Christianity is still, in the eyes of many, a "foreign religion", and Christians still form only a tiny minority of the overall population. Many major churches, particularly the Catholic church, have remained at a standstill for the last twenty-five years. However it must be noted that Christianity's cultural, social and educational influence in Taiwan goes far beyond the churches' institutional boundaries. It must also be noted that several Christian churches are actively engaged in the search for effective ways and means of promoting in Taiwan a meaningful Interreligious Dialogue. The Department and the Graduate School of Religious Studies at FuJen Catholic University are playing an important role in that field.

Even before Vatican II, several Christian leaders from the Catholic and the Protestant Churches of Taiwan had joined the Chinese Interfaith Friendship Association founded in Nanking by Archbishop Yupin, indicating how dialogue between Christians, Buddhists and Muslims was already progressing. In 1973, the Chinese Association for Interreligious Dialogue was created in Taipei with the view of fostering dialogue and cooperation among leaders of the seven religions then officially recognized by the government: Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, LiChiao, HsuanYuanChiao, Tenrikyo.

In September of 1991, the Catholic Bishops' Conference created a new National Commission, to replace the "Sub-committee for Ecumenical Affairs" which had been until then attached to the National Commission for Education and Culture. The new Commission was called "Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation" (literal translation of the Chinese name). It was also called "Commission for Interreligious and Ecumenical Cooperation" (official English name) to indicate that, in the multireligious context of Taiwan, the search for Christian unity and the promotion of interreligious dialogue are two inseparable dimensions of the same task. It is indeed through a genuine openness to our neighbors of other faiths, a deep respect of their beliefs and religious practices, a sincere dialogue and concrete initiatives of fraternal cooperation that we become able to listen to the Spirit at work in them and their communities of faith like in our own Christian communities. And it is from the deep communion of life which this attention generates that the ecumenical movement of the Church derives its

power. In 1995, a National "Commission for Promoting Christian Unity" was created. One year later, separate Diocesan Commissions for "Interreligious Dialogue" and "Promoting Christian Unity" were formed in three dioceses: Taipei, Chiayi, and Tainan; a joint Commission for "Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue" was formed in the Diocese of Kaohsiung.

Since its creation, the National Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation has been working in close cooperation with the National Council of Churches, the Chinese Interfaith Friendship Association, and several other organizations committed to the promotion of interreligious cooperation. Bishop Joseph Cheng, president of the Commission is also the president of the National Commission for Education and Culture. The actual executive secretary of the Commission is also executive secretary of the National Episcopal "Commission for Promoting Christian Unity", president of the "Taiwan Conference on Religion and Peace" (TCRP), and coordinator for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in the Jesuit Conference of East Asia and Oceania (JCEAO). Having been engaged in interreligious dialogue for almost thirty years, first in Taiwan and later on at the Asian level, he has many friends not only in each of the major communities of faith in Taiwan, but also in regional interreligious organizations like the ACRID (Asian Conference on Religion and Peace). These relationships are an important asset to the work of the Commission.

#### **A Brief Summary of the Commission's Activities**

- 1992. National Seminar on "Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization" (September 1992, 63 participants);
- 1993. Two national seminars on "Educational Work and Interreligious Dialogue"
  - In Catholic Middle Schools (April 1993, 50 participants);
  - In Catholic Universities (August 1993, 45 participants).
- 1993. Welcome of Cardinal Arinze, organization of his ten-day visit to Taiwan.
- 1994. Buddhist-Christian Seminar on Social Work (January 1994, 65 participants), planned in cooperation with national Bishops' Commission for Social Development and Buddhist TzuChi Foundation.

1994. Buddhist-Christian Seminar on the Family (August 1994, 66 participants), planned in cooperation with the National Buddhist Association and other Buddhist Institutions
  1995. Help in local preparations and follow-up work of International Buddhist-Christian Colloquium on "Buddhism and Christianity: Convergence and Divergence" organized by PCID, held from July 31 to August 4, at Fo Kuang Shan Buddhist Monastery, in Kaohsiung.
  1995. Second Buddhist Christian Seminar on the Family (September 1995, 91 participants), planned in cooperation with the National Buddhist Association and other Buddhist institutions
  1996. Help in local preparations and follow-up work of BIRA V/4, the Fourth Asian Bishops' Institute on Theology of Harmony. ("Taoist and Confucian Contributions to Harmony in East Asia, Christians in Dialogue with Confucian Thought and Taoist Spirituality") organized by FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (FABC-OEIA), held from April 15 49 at T'ien Ti Chiao Spirituality Center Nant'ou Hsien .
  1996. CRBC secretaries' seven day visit (Sept. 18-25) to the Church in Korea, at the Invitation of the Bishops' Conference of Korea.
  1996. Third Buddhist Christian Seminar on the Family (October 1996, 92 participants), planned in cooperation with the National Buddhist Association and other Buddhist institutions
  1997. Cooperation with Fujen Catholic University in the planning of Taiwan religious leaders' participation in the university's welcome of Chiara Lubich (January) and the Dalai Lama (March).
- From 1991 to 1997, the secretary of the Commission attended thirteen international seminars or consultations: one in She K'ou (Mainland China), two in Hong Kong, three in Thailand, two in the U.S.A.(Boston, Chicago), three in Italy (Rome, Riva del Garda, Naples), one in Paris, and one in Hammamet, Tunisia. He also made, for the JCEAO, several trips to: Manila (12), Tokyo

(2), Thailand (2), Korea (1), Jakarta (1), Kuala Lumpur (1), Phnom Penh (1), and Melbourne (1).

Frequent visits to monasteries, temples, religious houses (ching she), and other centers of religious activities (schools, universities, research centers, social welfare institutions, press, radio and audio visual centers, etc.), participation in consultations, seminars, religious celebrations and other important events of various communities of faith, continuous participation in Ling Chiu Shan Prajna Cultural and Educational Foundation's work for the "Museum of World Religions", publication of proceedings of the seminars organized by the Commission, learning from others and together with others, sharing of information and experiences, building up every day new and strong links of friendship... All of these form the way for the continuous movement and development of the work of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation. As the amount and importance of the work continues to increase, more help is urgently needed.