
Buddhists and Dialogue: Interreligious Dialogue and Buddhist-Christian Social Action

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Abstract: This paper considers Paul Knitter's (2013) Christian proposition that inter-religious dialogue can contribute to social action; moreover, that social action can contribute to inter-religious dialogue. In consideration of Knitter's approach and its resonance with Buddhist social activism a comparative weaving of Buddhist social action produces a socially engaged dialogue wherein the commonality of what is 'all around religions' – a suffering humanity – is a starting point for action-oriented inter-religious dialogue. Action, therefore, holds a practical priority for dialoguers over theological or spiritual dialogue, not to discount either – but finds a need for cooperation and foci based on the sign of the times, as a global imperative to act. Such an approach requires that Christian dialogue with Buddhists specifically, and other religionists potentially, allows unique conclusions to be drawn. That is, both in Knitter's proposition and Buddhist social activism the requirement to engage the suffering and oppressed around the table of dialogue is a significant contribution to the field of inter-religious and comparative religious study. The proximate concerns with all forms of global suffering allows for a better understanding of each other in the specific Buddhist-Christian context. The development of a social action model within which Buddhist social engagement provides a readily available audience with which Christian social activists may partner, also contributes to the theoretical understanding of postmodern and particularist criticisms of inter-religious dialogue. Buddhist dialogue actors form a snapshot of twentieth-century evidence reinforcing the claims in the paper.

Keywords: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, Socially Engaged Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist Activism, Socially Engaged Inter-religious Dialogue, Inter-religious Dialogue and Social Action

Introduction

The Buddhist position on dialogue is one of the few contemporary discussions among practitioners that appears to have tacit agreement. In as much as dialogue, internal or external is generally seen as a virtue and wholesome, caveated with a host of practice activity including right mindfulness, right effort, right meditation, loving

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kindness, Buddha nature, the path of the *Bodhisattva*, skilful means and more (contingent on the Buddhist approach), and that dialogue, boldly described ‘in Buddhism’, ‘is Buddhism’, as Alan Watts put it:

Buddhism is unlike other religions; in that it does not tell you anything. It doesn't require you to believe in anything. Buddhism is a dialogue. And what are called the teachings of Buddhism, are nothing more than the opening phrases or opening exchanges in the dialogue. Buddhism is a dialogue between a Buddha and an ordinary man or rather someone who insists on defining himself as an ordinary man. (Watts, (1969) [2019] archive [online]).

Dialogue for Buddhists rarely raises questions associated with a reason to avoid it, as for Buddhists it is unavoidable, even if the superficial debate about authenticity or vexed conversations about translation and transliteration from ancient texts, appears. Within Theravada, Mahayana (greater vehicle) and Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) Buddhism(s) and a range of esoteric movements (historic and contemporary), dialogue is at the very heart of practice, albeit with a variety of interpretations of the path of a Buddha. Dialogue is shaped by its interior and exterior foci and comes in a variety of forms, as ‘teacher-pupil’, as ‘monastic-lay’ as intra- and inter-religious, inter-cultural, trans-cultural and transnational. Buddhists have always engaged in a range of dialogic processes with other religions, with non-religious actors, with state authorities and within institutional, and today, globally transnational networks. Buddhism is essentially a teaching of dialogue. ‘Its enormous body of scriptures, known as the “eighty thousand teachings,” originated in Shakyamuni’s candid dialogues with people from all walks of life’ (Soka Gakkai International, 2022[online]).

The European Enlightenment (Swidler 2013) influenced the developing ecologies of ecumenism and saw Buddhists on a global stage at major inter-religious events, including ‘the public launching of modern inter-religious dialogue’ (Swidler 2013, 6), the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago 1893. Here ‘Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka [was] representing Theravada Buddhism, and D.T. Suzuki from Japan representing Zen Buddhism. They and many other religious teachers and leaders toured or taught in the West for years, spreading their teachings, gaining new followers in some instances, and promoting a new openness to other religions’ (Swidler 2013, 6). In the shift of Buddhism(s) east-west, the *dharma* – teachings and practices of the Buddha and compassionate *Bodhisattvas* moves in the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, concomitant with its relationship to Protestant Christianity, and later (post Vatican II) Roman Catholicism. Buddhism emerges as part of the global ecumenical movements that developed after the European Enlightenment.

To foreground Buddhist dialogue, it helps to briefly explore some of the complexities associated with Buddhisms on a global scale, their evolution and doctrinal and philosophical positioning. The foundations of Buddhism, *vis-à-vis* the life and works of the Buddha of the current epoch – Siddhattha Gotama (in the *Theravada*, 5th Century BCE) and later manifestations of a more supernatural, supramundane Sakyamuni Buddha within *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* movements – from the first century BCE to a more developed Mahayanist doctrinal canonical approach in and beyond the fifth century CE – provide a template for a community. Exemplars include those followers of a monastic lifestyle which created the *sangha/samgha* (community of monks and later nuns) and established its coterminous existence with the laity of followers, which spread the length and breadth of the Asian continent during the Axial and post-Axial age.

The fundamental principles of Buddhism(s) globally require some attention for the sake of context and continuity. Starting points, for example, are reflected in the ‘three marks’ of all conditioned phenomena, which are described as impermanence (Pali, *anicca*; Sanskrit *anitya*); *dukkha* – unsatisfactoriness/suffering inherent in life, death, rebirth; and not-Self (Pali, *anatta*; Sanskrit *anatman*) – in which the unitary self is more appropriately described as ‘a cluster of changing conditioned physical and mental processes or *dhammas*’ (Harvey 2001, 78). For Buddhism(s), impermanence depicted by change, is at the heart of all sentient and non-sentient existence, the only exception being *nirvana* (the unconditioned Buddhist enlightenment). The dialogue internally initiated and externally focused does however carry some obvious commonalities of approach and purpose across various manifestations of Buddhism(s). These include, both an internally (interior) focused dialogue deconstructing the constituent personality, and an externally (exterior) focused dialogue both soteriological and ontologically associated with early forms of Buddhism (Southern Buddhism) on one hand – seeking the nirvana of the arhat – and later Mahayana and Vajrayana (Eastern and Northern Buddhism) – doctrine, seeking the universal *bodhisattva*, a being with Buddha-nature working for future Buddhahood a ‘being-for-enlightenment’ (Harvey 1990; Williams 1989) for all sentient life, on the other.

The former draws on doctrinal ideas born out of meditative practice and attention to the cornerstones in the Three Refuges (Buddha, *Dhamma/Dharma* and *Sangha/samgha*), the Four-Fold Noble (or ennobling) Truths and the concomitant Noble Eight-Fold Path and conditioned arising (dependent origination). The latter in the historical enterprise of communication beyond *sanghas/samghas* and communities, and in cross-cultural, multi-religious environments over time. The Mahayana broadly draws on a number of distinctions from early Buddhist experiences of the person of the Buddha in historic and more individualist terms. The developing Mahayana

Buddhism probably did not share today's recognisable and distinctive authoritative sutra literature until the fifth century CE. This form of Buddhism was transmitted via Tibet – Northern Buddhism (Vajrayana) and China – Eastern Buddhism (Mahayana later extending to Japan) and has extensive canons in those languages and many later texts translated from Sanskrit originals. This literature is in some ways parallel to early Buddhism's *Pali* canonical texts. The Mahayana and Vajrayana both see magic and co-opting of indigenous religious and spiritual practices as part of its evolution. This includes the supernatural, where Sakyamuni Buddha is able to travel within and between worlds and across the universe in the quest to save all sentient life, as distinct from the person of the Buddha Gotama in the Indian traditions.

The premise for Buddhist-Christian dialogue through social action – à la Paul Knitter

I make no apology for drawing heavily on the work of Knitter (2013) as the central debate supporting Christian and Buddhist social action and in reflecting on Cornille's 'virtues for dialogue' (2013). There are key concepts to identify that can be used here, not least in Knitter's (2013) bold claim that 'Inter-religious dialogue and social action need each other' (Knitter in Cornille, 2013, 133). Moreover, his conviction that interreligious conversation and social action would be more effective if combined, opening a debate about the nature of Buddhist social action and the extent to which a Buddhist-Christian dialogue where both parties were predisposed to move from conversation to action could change the value of such an enterprise. It could provide longevity to an approach that might otherwise seek to 'get things done'. Knitter succinctly describes the position thus: 'They are two distinct enterprises – inter-religious conversation and social engagement; but their very different activities and ideals can be qualitatively enhanced if they would, as it were, join forces' (ibid., 2013, 133).

In defining terms that can usefully be deployed as a basis for our understanding of inter-religious dialogue and from which to consider Buddhist social action, Knitter provides the following, which is a valuable insight and starting point for this paper:

To be engaged in what is called a dialogue among religious believers, one must: a) speak one's own convictions clearly and respectfully; b) listen to the convictions of others openly and generously; c) be open to learning something new and changing one's mind; and, if that happens, d) be prepared to change one's way of acting accordingly. Basically and simply, inter-religious dialogue is a particular instance of the way human beings interact in order to render history a movement rather than a repetition: they talk with each other, they challenge each

other, they agree and disagree – and so they grow in a fuller understanding of reality, or what is called truth (Knitter in Cornille 2013, 133).

Knitter also defines what he means by *social action*, as ‘any human activity which seeks resolution from what obstructs and promotes advancement of human and environmental flourishing’ (ibid., 2013,133). In his assessment of the value of social action-focused inter-religious dialogue he contends that social activists and religious people are either one and the same, or they are activists and religious actors working together in collaboration to achieve their goals. In the specific use of the Vatican Council for Inter-religious Dialogue categories, Knitter proposes the use of three forms of dialogue: *The dialogue of theology*, *The dialogue of spirituality* and *The dialogue of action* (Knitter, in Cornille 2013, 134 [Vatican 1991, 42-43]). In *the dialogue of theology*, study of one another’s sacred texts and language are required to better understand the doctrines, teachings and practices, adjusting misconceptions and attempting to understand concepts. *The dialogue of spirituality* seeks to bring a more mystical understanding of experiences through emotion felt in ritual activity and in heartfelt beliefs, often sharing those experiences. *The dialogue of action* takes the form of shared activity framed around problem solving and through shared action, confronting and reaching resolutions (the focus of Knitter’s approach and that adopted here from a Buddhist perspective).

In Cornille’s work (2008, 2013) we see an additional supportive foundation by which to scope the parameters of dialogue, not least in setting out the conditions for dialoguers’ approaches to dialogue using ‘the language of virtues’ (2013, 30) in contrast to laboured theological debates about Inclusive, Exclusive and/or Pluralistic theologies of religions. Virtues resonate with Buddhist practice, where Buddhist social action also reflects a type of Aristotelian virtue ethics at a personal, and group/communal level. By extension, both within the Buddhist social action framework and as personal virtues for Cornille (2008), her *conditions for dialogue* extend to wider religious traditions/social movements.

The five virtues put forward include humility, commitment, trust in interconnectedness, empathy and hospitality. In summary, *humility* categorises interreligious dialoguers as requiring humility about what their own religions tell them, and this means being humble about what they think they know and that there is always more that can be learned. What Cornille (2008) calls ‘doctrinal humility’ speaks to the idea that regardless of truth claims made, no religion has sole access to the whole truth, which is either ‘*divine*’ or ‘*transcendent*’ truth. As Knitter argues when interpreting Cornille, ‘no human mind or system can contain the fullness of such truths’ (2013, 135). *Commitment* as the second virtue, involves all participating

parties holding firm to their truth and in doing so sharing the idea that truth matters and that other participants can share in the liberating truth of their experiences, which are being witnessed to them. *Trust in Interconnectedness* seeks a level of commitment as described above in which, regardless of the depth of that commitment and the incommensurable differences they have religiously, there is something that connects religious believers allowing for a degree of understanding and challenge. *Empathy* identifies a heartfelt as well as a deep-rooted commitment where personal feelings allow a more intimate experience of the other dialogue partners' commitments. In this approach there is a theological 'passing over' into other traditions, their stories and symbolism, then 'passing back' into one's own tradition and comparing how that experience changes your understanding. Finally, the virtue of *hospitality* is described by Cornille (2008, 177) as pivotal and 'the sole sufficient condition for dialogue'. When bringing religious believers into our religious homes, as hosts, we should be open to the gifts they bring us. These gifts can be new, insightful and even in tension with our own, opening up the opportunity for the participants we are in dialogue with to offer more truths, which we receive without having the last word.

In consideration of what Cornille sees as epistemological requirements for individuals and religious traditions '[t]he considerations of humility, interconnection and hospitality in particular, involve attitudes toward the religious other which must be generated from within a particular religious self-understanding (Cornille 2013, 30). Here, the mining of one's own tradition to facilitate constructive dialogue with others forms part of the heuristic approach to conditions for dialogue. Only in the very act of taking part, in engaging with other religions, do the limits and opportunities become apparent. In a Buddhist-Christian context, some Buddhists have come to develop alternative understandings of interconnection with the Christian notion of the Trinity, and conversely Christian theologians have deepened their understanding of doctrinal humility.

Knitter (2013, 137), however, problematises the tension between the universal and the particular within Cornille's virtues approach. The concerns he raises reflect a fear of the virtues being less 'urgent and promising' and more 'dangerous and harmful'. In making the claim he is reminding theologians and dialoguers of the postmodern particularist critique of religious pluralism and of inter-religious dialogue, which he describes variously as 'particularism', 'the postliberal approach' or the 'attitude of acceptance' (Knitter 2002, 173–237). The postmodern critique suggests that '*the particular trumps the universal. Or: the dominance of diversity obstructs the possibility of commonality*' (Knitter 2013, 136; Tilley 2007, 118–123). Particularism therefore has the potential to block inter-religious dialogue, based on the presupposition that dialoguers may be in danger of forgetting that culture determines a practical sense of

socialisation and that knowledge within a particular cultural sphere provides experiences shaped by and interpreted within that cultural dynamic. The dynamics of culture are simultaneously socially constructed. In this assessment Knitter draws out the stark reality of the particularist postmodern critique of inter-religious dialogue as subjugating the universal, thus:

So if there is validity to the particularist claim that all our efforts to know and understand are socially and politically conditioned – including our efforts to know those who come from different cultures and societies – then the particularists draw a daunting conclusion: all universal truth claims, or all attempts to announce what is true always and everywhere for everyone, are inherently, incorrigibly, unavoidably *dangerous*. (Knitter 2013, 137)

Defending the right to hold particularist convictions in the face of universalising imperialisms is a feature of the desire to recognise and avoid universal truth claims. Such claims are synonymous with power, possessed by those who make them, and they may even unintentionally dominate as a consequence. The challenge then to inter-religious dialogue is in the claims of universal truths, common ground, global ethics or shared experiences (ibid., 2013, 137) – not to deny that such experiences can be shared. What it does, however, is imply an uncertainty in the knowledge associated with what is common ground or shared experiences, based on how it can be known, given each participant will see it from a different perspective. In addition, this epistemological position relies on the presupposition that a *common something* exists, which given different religious perspectives may be in doubt. The particularist position assumes a best fit model of religious pluralism as holding closer to a form of exclusivism than might otherwise have generally been considered. Knitter (2013, 137–138) refers to it as proceeding from a position of knowing one's own religion and assessing others' using the knowledge of your own religious experience.

Insofar as the virtues highlighted above (Cornille 2008) are concerned, it leaves only *commitment* and *humility* as tangible conditions for dialogue, whereas *trust in interconnectedness*, *empathy* and *hospitality* are left in limbo as it becomes unclear what it is that connects us. However, for Buddhists and those engaged in social action/activism, the interconnectedness /interdependency of all conditioned phenomenon are critical to understanding a Buddhist worldview. The particularist position holds to one where inter-religious dialogue is seen as a *good neighbourly option* (ibid., 2013,138). With this in mind and in line with many practical examples of how and where inter-religious dialogue happens in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, religiously plural societies, we find ourselves respecting each other, coming together in times of crisis and then returning to our own geographic, social, cultural and religious spaces

after these connections. This form of live-and-let-live approach provides for each to commit to their own religion, hold it up as best and all other religious neighbours do the same (ibid., 2013, 138).

In the sections that follow, this paper will make the case for a socially engaged dialogue using Knitter's (2013) approach based in the Roman Catholic Christian inter-religious dialogic encounter and drawing on Buddhist social action (using a contested label of Socially Engaged Buddhism), looking at the frameworks for each comparatively. Knitter (2013) insists, and this paper endorses the idea, that a socially engaged inter-religious dialogue is an imperative in a world of uncertainty and insecurity in a globalising context. It may be insufficient to rely on theology and spirituality alone as the focus for interreligious dialogue and expect them to address common ills and the societal concerns of those who have religious experiences – not to mention the very many who do not. Buddhist social action resonates with much that Knitter is suggesting as a way to establish a form of inter-religious dialogue that does not deny theological or spiritual dialogue and its value to practitioners but does provide an alternative in dialogue for action focused ideas.

This comes back to Knitter's opening reciprocal questions, '*why does inter-religious dialogue need social action?* And '*why does social action need inter-religious dialogue?*' (Knitter 2013, 139). The first question posed reflects humanist criticism of inter-religious dialogue, and of religions more broadly, as part of a Marxian understanding of *opium of the people*, (Marx [1843], trans 1970) in which the suffering masses both in human and planetary terms see religions as part of the problem in many cases, and not the solution. Or as Knitter (2013, 139) suggests, are a distraction to that suffering and have historically, directly, or indirectly, supported the perpetrators of it.

The manner in which inter-religious dialogue is undertaken has also been critically reviewed by humanists, often considered by them as *nice to do*, or *in ivory towers*, where the disconnect from what is discussed in dialogue and how it impacts everyday life is problematised. Despite the potential spiritual nourishment such dialogue might provide, it fails to address the deep concerns of humanists about the levels of suffering of people and the planet. These sentiments, associated with suffering humanity, resonate within Buddhism and particularly where Buddhist social activists reflect on – a crudely put – 'navel-gazing tradition' and question Buddhism's impact and its credentials as a religion that puts suffering at the centre of its philosophy and practice, yet often fails to act in societal terms to alleviate it.

The second question, '*why does social action need inter-religious dialogue?*' is borne out of two very obvious and practical responses: first, that the majority of humans on the planet currently, are religious, in one form or another, and if the damage to our

environments, families and communities is to be resolved, it will require great efforts to bring peoples of religions to support the service of humankind and the planet; second, if the life-threatening problems of humanity are to be addressed, even in part, to ignore religious adherents is to do so at the peril of the species and the planet. The global problems we face require global solutions if we have any hope of managing the risks we face through global warming, state and family violence, violence in social and political discourse and action, in intra- and inter-cultural violence, racially motivated violence, gendered violence against women and girls, and all forms of exploitation, injustice, inequalities and environmental degradation. These difficult questions are a focus for Buddhist activists, particularly those who see social action using compassion and wisdom of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as inherent in their practice.

In support of Knitter's (2013) *call to action* this paper will bring Buddhist social action into focus as part of that call to embrace the commonality of what is *all around religions* even if the *something in common* within religious experiences is more challenging to define. Suffering/dissatisfactoriness and in many cases unnecessary suffering (all forms of *dukkha*) is at the centre of the world and of Buddhists' worldviews, and to act in the face of human suffering and to consider Knitter's call, is where *socially focused* Buddhism sees that social action can act as a conduit for action-oriented inter-religious dialogue across diverse religious landscapes. This poses a two-fold question: why and how does a social-action-focused Buddhist approach to inter-religious dialogue differ from what is extant in bi-, tri-lateral or multi-lateral combinations of Buddhist-Christian, Buddhist-Christian-Jewish, Buddhist-Muslim-Christian-Jewish and other dialogues? In broad terms the answer to these questions is framed in the basic tenets of inter-religious dialogue where Buddhists are externally engaged, with others as groups/representative of religions – in most cases – with a prophetic religion where action has a practical priority over spirituality or theology as a starting point in the search for the commonality of suffering humanity all around religious exponents.

For example, in theological debate, theocentric and anthropocentric labels are used to describe the differences between Christians and Buddhists. Barnes (1990) suggests a theocentric anthropocentric divide, claiming, '[t]he monotheism of semitic religion begins with the creator God who gives value to all human life. Buddhism, by contrast, seems to be thoroughly anthropocentric' (Barnes 1990, 55). If you see these theological distinctions in Buddhist-Christian contexts and consider Barnes' perspective, it is too narrowly focused and lacks any sense of Buddhism as ecocentric, something Buddhist social activists proclaim as fundamental to environmental protection. Whereas anthropocentrism predicts a moral obligation only to human be-

ings, ecocentrism includes all living beings, and Buddhists would extend that to all sentient life.

To move beyond these labels including the distinctions between the prophetic and the mystical is not to ignore them, but to prioritise, as Knitter (2013) suggests a more practical starting point for *social action*. Pym (1993) considers how the basic tenets of a Christian creator God where the spirit of creation in the world fixes God, and where Buddhism denies creator beings (non-theistic) and instead offers a no-self (*anatta*) philosophy and practice. These are seemingly incongruent positions, yet his experience shows, where true dialogue takes place there is an amazing depth of agreement and understanding. There are obvious differences but where each is uncovered there are even greater levels of appreciation. So too with Harris (2003) in her assessment of Buddhists' understanding of Jesus. She considers the questions that arise through inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism and implies Buddhists in dialogue assume either an exclusivist or inclusivist position in relation to Jesus: few adopt pluralism in her experience. The two non-negotiable tendencies in a more exclusivist account reflect on Buddhists that find the question of anger in Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple and that the Saviour presents for Buddhists, some difficulties based on:

the twin emphases on Jesus as God and Jesus as Saviour, as 'other power'. The difficulties are compounded when 'final' and 'only' qualify the latter. Buddhism is non-theistic. Although Buddhists attribute to the Buddha some of the qualities that Christians attribute to God, and although deities occur within Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha is not a God and Buddhists do not look to a creator or sustainer of the universe. (Harris 2003, 120)

Socially Engaged Buddhism and Social Action

In the Buddhist context this paper reflects upon the actions and the labels of *social engagement* twenty years after its academic zenith as holding the potential for practical solutions to societal problems and challenges, as well as an academic discipline, wherein the scholarly preoccupation with the label may be in danger of negating the action-oriented focus using similar particularist critiques levelled earlier at inter-religious dialogue; both arenas are contested spaces. Recent literature muses on the notion of *socially engaged* or *engaged Buddhism* as having been consigned only to a brief spell of so-called socially focused Buddhism and a concomitant period in post-Cold War academic Buddhist studies, when the interests of Buddhists and scholars of religion paid attention to a form of Buddhist social engagement, epitomised by Hsu who asked sceptically, '[w]hatever happened to "Engaged Buddhism"? Twenty years

after a flurry of publications placing this global movement firmly on the map, enthusiasm for the term itself appears to have evaporated' (Hsu, 2022:17). This debate about an anglophone academic socially engaged Buddhism draws on the late modern experiences of mostly insider scholarship – the author being one of them – (Henry, 2006, 2013, Cleig, 2021) described by Hsu as a:

hegemonic form of Engaged Buddhism concretized as an Anglophone scholarly project in the late 1990s that I will label “Academic Engaged Buddhism” (1988–2009), as conceptually built on but distinct from how Anglophone Asian Buddhist leaders deployed “Engaged Buddhism” in the postcolonial Cold War era. (Hsu 2022, 18)

The implication of this was that Asian Buddhists using the term ‘Engaged Buddhism’ were averse to and critical of a scholarly approach to Buddhist social activism in anglophone western discourse that reflected a colonial position where Buddhisms that were seen as seemingly *world denying* were somehow in deficit to other forms of Buddhist practice, insofar as those *engaged* implies a disengagement of other Buddhists. Even though a generation of engaged Buddhist scholars considered there to be a narrow (but misconceived) idea of world-denying Buddhism creating such a separation of East-West, societal engagement and social action, it can be argued (Henry 2013) it is indivisible in Buddhist practice from the ‘purification, development and harmonious integration of the factors of personality, through the cultivation of devotion, virtue and meditation’ (Harvey 2001, 78).

What differs is not the fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine and practice (described above) but the application to include the potential of both personal and social transformation. King (2009, 1) defines with confidence her object of study thus: ‘a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet non-violently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society.’ She also clearly identifies the basic premise from which many Buddhist social reformers start, even where they are distinct from one another, claiming, ‘the basic teachings of Buddhism can profitably be read with the intention of determining their implications for social ethics, and for social and political theory’ (King, in Queen and King 1996, 408). The ideas associated with the *social* and *political* are clearly articulated in the academic scholarship of the late modern period, despite recent literature problematising the lack of clarity about how the ‘political’ is used or eschewed in the discourse (Hsu 2022). This goes to the heart of the ambiguity about who is *engaged* as a Buddhist and whether that means others are not. But this may in light of the consistent rumbling of disquiet academically be better understood in terms of *a socially inclusive dharma*. This characteristic is seemingly missed in recent literature but was articulated by many more scholars and practitioner-leaders and writers during the post-Cold War period and

into the early twenty-first century (Ambedkar 1956; Eppsteiner 1988; Macy 1991; Gyatso 1992; Kraft 1992; Queen and King 1996; Glassman 1998; Aiken 1999; Ariyaratne 1999; Nhat Hanh 1991, 1999; Sivaraksa 1999, 2005; Cheng Yen 2002; Jones 2003; Loy 2003; Queen, Prebish and Keown 2003; King 2005; Henry 2006, 2013; Rothberg 2006; Queen 2018;).

The twentieth-century development of socially engaged Buddhism (SEB) has provenance in reform Buddhism, or so-called 'Protestant Buddhism' a form of Buddhist modernism (Bechert 1966; Obeyesekere 1988; Prothero 1995) of the nineteenth century, particularly in Sri Lanka. Here the colonial Christian influence among many urban British-educated laity saw a resurgence of reform Buddhism in opposition to Christian teachings and mission, advocating the early *Pali* canonical texts and greater emphasis for monks as social activists. This follows a Gandhian model of village awakening (Roy 1984), designed to improve their economic, social and natural environment (Harvey 2001). The challenges of an Anglosphere within which engaged Buddhist labels predominated in late modernity reflects a fundamental shift towards the need for scholarly recognition of Western and Asian Buddhist understandings of these terms and their application. Hsu asks:

How do they do and think the various activities we in the Anglosphere file under the labels of 'engagement' or 'activism': social service, disaster relief, development work, peace-brokering, consciousness-raising, policy-writing, lobbying, protesting, electioneering? What do we, and they, lose and gain when we collapse these activities into the singular frame of 'Engaged Buddhism'?

The collapsing of the various forms of activism into a label that held up a burgeoning and now less clear sense of scholarship at the turn of this millennium should not, however, detract from action-oriented dialogue within which Buddhists, Christians and other religions can come together in the face of human suffering, and as a consequence begin to better understand each other by laying a hermeneutical grounding of experiences in order to know each other. As Knitter implies, 'They form a *community of solidarity* with those suffering oppression which becomes a community of conversation with each other' (Knitter 2013, 142). The suffering Buddhists see as integral to existential liberation, Christians and other co-religionists also recognise as requiring a response from religious believers. The resolve of Buddhist activists and Buddhist humanists to see, in the suffering of the oppressed, the need for compassion and wisdom, the two arms of *dharma* that shape Buddhist social activism, brings with it Knitter's conviction to want to know more of what sustains Buddhist practice. The necessity to bring those who are suffering into the conversation makes the voices they provide imperative for socially engaged dialogue as religious believers

cannot better know each other if they do not first understand those who are suffering.

This brings a new endeavour in interreligious engagement, providing those voices to better equip those who broker power with an understanding of their oppression that cannot otherwise be known. The coming together of Buddhists, Christians and other religionists is exemplified in more than eighty years of connectivity between Buddhists on the global stage and other religious believers and practitioners in dialogue, around which activist-oriented approaches has proved to be a sustaining feature. There are very many examples of Buddhist activists and the movements they have founded with global reach, that we could examine here in brief, but I will provide only three, two from East Asian Buddhism and one from Southeast Asian Buddhism.

These examples include the founding in 1970 in Kyoto Japan of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) – now known as Religions for Peace (RFP) – by co-founder of the Buddhist sect Rissho Kosei Kai (1938) by Nikkyo Niwano. With seventy-five countries affiliating to RFP, and Rissho Kosei Kai having more than 6.5 million adherents, Buddhist activism under Niwano in the early 1960s developed through his relationship with a Belgian Catholic priest, Joseph Spae, who introduced Niwano to Pope Paul VI during the second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Niwano put much of his energy within Rissho Kosei Kai into interreligious dialogue. RFP is the largest global network promoting interreligious dialogue; its focus is on peace building, human development, social justice and harmony. It supports an action-oriented activism borne out of its interpretation of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra which sees truth as universal and all religions as being manifestations of that truth (RFP [online] 2022).

The second example brings Daisaku Ikeda and the Sokka Gakkai International (SGI) global movement into view. Both Ikeda and the SGI proclaim cultural and religious differences are among the most divisive issues for humanity. His perspective on religions is that they should provide harmony as a fundamental function. Ikeda's solution for overcoming disharmony and conflict is bringing people together on the basis of their shared humanity through dialogue and education.

While we share different values, how far can we expand a common ground for all humanity through true dialogue? The important thing is how we can use the power of dialogue to bring the world closer together and raise humanity to a new eminence. In the present highly complex world of overlapping hatreds, contradictory interests, and conflict, even attempting to do such things may seem like an idealism that will only take us in circles. But . . . I am someone who believes

that a magnificent and very real challenge as we seek world peace is to allow the civilization of dialogue to flower in the twenty-first century. (Ikeda and Weiming 2011, 92)

Ikeda sees the struggle with dogmatism and fanaticism as epitomised by an energy which can be redirected through dialogue towards what he calls a more 'humanistic Buddhism.' This is a Buddhism where compassion and commitment to dialogue reinvigorate and reaffirm the shared humanity of those who engage with it, in what he describes below as challenging and intense encounters aimed at better understanding the assumptions that bind and drive others. His overarching philosophy through which he dedicates his life for peace is borne out of his faith in humanity, which he asserts is the foundation for dialogue, thus:

As ripples of dialogue multiply and spread, they have the potential to generate the kind of sea change that will redirect the forces of fanaticism and dogmatism. The cumulative effect of such seemingly small efforts is, I believe, sufficient to redirect the current of the times. What is crucial is the hard and patient work of challenging, through the spiritual struggle of intense encounter and dialogue, the assumptions and attachments that bind and drive people (Ikeda 2005, 2).

Thich Naht Hanh (1927-2022) and his global movement *The Order of Interbeing*, and *Community of Interbeing* developed out of the Vietnamese War in the early 1970s. He was exiled for much of his life due to his opposition to the war and created Plum Village in Southern France as one of a number of global bases for his order, community and followers. His work brings a form of Zen practice epitomised by the state of what he coined as *interbeing*, interdependence of all conditioned phenomena within which he presents the case for a global *being peace* community. His global reach – not unlike that of the Dalai Lama – is reflected in his understanding of suffering humanity and his ability to engage in dialogue with Christians and other religionists around the globe. In an interview for NPR he talks of the early days in the Vietnam War when he was supporting the School for Youth and Social Services in response to suffering and through what he coined as 'engaged Buddhism':

We trained young monks and young people so that they become social and peace workers, come into the area where there are victims of war to care for the wounded, to resettle the refugees and to set up new places for these people to live, to build a school for our children, to build a health center. We did all sorts of things, but the essential is that we did that as practitioners and not just social workers alone. ... suffering, that is really the energy of compassion that motive you to do it (Thich Nhat Hanh, [1997] 2022 [online]).

Conclusions

The strength of a social-action-oriented inter-religious dialogue, where Buddhist and Christian encounters can provide tangible outcomes associated with their experiences, lies in the extent to which it is true that Knitter's (2013) proposition that inter-religious dialogue can contribute to social action, and that social action can contribute to inter-religious dialogue and in doing so has a practical priority over theology and spirituality. In this paper the resonance for Buddhist activists with Knitter's approach bears witness to the connectivity between a Christian socially engaged inter-religious dialogue and a Buddhist socially engaged inter-religious dialogue, going beyond where bi-, tri- and multi-lateral dialogue with Christians and Buddhists has gone before. Here both see as a priority the suffering of the marginalised and oppressed, whose voices should be heard.

The Buddhist social action focus is borne out of a twentieth-century movement of so-called engaged or socially engaged Buddhist practice, albeit the labels in current use eschew the earlier forms from the last twenty years, and instead use terms like 'Buddhist Humanism', 'Buddhist activism', 'Activist Buddhism', 'Buddhism in the World' and 'Humanistic Buddhism' (Hsu 2021, 23). Nonetheless a social-action-oriented inter-religious dialogue draws on a range of activisms in social, political, economic and environmental arenas both for Buddhists and Christians. Within these areas Buddhist solutions to global conflict, Buddhist perspectives on nonviolence, the value of simplicity and humility, Buddhism and environmentalism (Sivaraksa 2005), *The Practice of Peace* (Nhat Hanh 2004), *About Money and right livelihoods* (Moon 2004; Aitken, 2004), *Anger and racism* (Hart 2004) and many more provide for the diversity of approaches that many engaged Buddhisms might adhere to and within which the suffering of the marginalised should be heard.

The proximate concern for all forms of global suffering allows for a better understanding of each other in the specific Buddhist-Christian context. The development of a social action model within which Buddhist social engagement provides a readily available audience with which Christians can partner also contributes to the theoretical understanding of postmodern and particularist criticisms of inter-religious dialogue. Buddhist dialogue actors form a snapshot of twentieth and early twenty-first century evidence reinforcing the claims in this paper.

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